



the weekly  
**Standard**

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**THE CRACK-UP  
OF THEOCRACY  
IN IRAN**

**REUEL MARC GERECHT  
ELLIOTT ABRAMS  
KELLY JANE TORRANCE**

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# The Gang That Couldn't Pump Straight

Conservatives like to tout the benefits of federalism, and there are many. However, if states are the “laboratories of democracy,” there will always be a few mad scientists to contend with. One of the dumber things you’ll experience in driving across the country is that in Oregon you’re not allowed to pump your own gas. As of January 1, that’s changing somewhat. Thanks to a bill passed by the legislature last year, you can now pump your own gas in about half the state’s counties—the rural counties that have fewer than 40,000 residents.

Beyond being a weak attempt at a jobs program for low-income residents, there’s never been any reasonable rationale for not allowing self-service in Oregon. Nonetheless, many of the state’s residents are unfamiliar with pumping their own gas. When KTVL, a Medford, Oregon, TV station, announced the change in rules on its Facebook page—well, it turns out that nanny states create a bunch of whiny babies.

The station was deluged with panicked comments: “I don’t even know HOW to pump gas and I am 62, native Oregonian. . . . I say NO THANKS!



Online mockery of distraught Oregonians



I don’t want to smell like gasoline!” and “I will not feel safe pumping my own gas. . . . Not to mention it’s freezing and rainy. So thank you to all who voted to change it. You have now taken away a nice luxury that most of us enjoyed.” Other comments ranged from concerns about getting cancer to being attacked by transients while

you’re forced to leave the safety of your automobile.

This being the Internet, people from around the country have naturally taken it upon themselves to go to KTVL’s Facebook page and roundly mock Oregonians for their silly fears: “Is this how the fires in California started? Was it caused by someone from Oregon trying to travel and pump their own gas?” Only at *Nj.com*, one of the biggest news providers in New Jersey, which is the only other state daft enough not to let citizens pump their own gas, was there a show of solidarity: “Oregon descends into madness, forces citizens to pump their own gas.”

Still, in a progressive state that prides itself on being the first to legalize assisted suicide and allowing teenagers 15 or older to get Medicaid to pay for their sex change without parental permission, you’d think citizens would be more open to such modest new freedoms. Oregon’s state motto is “She flies with her own wings,” but they really should consider that sometimes there’s a reason every other state has a different flight plan. ♦

## In Other Oregon News

The new tax law is prompting the usual crocodile tears from liberals, who complain (falsely) that it is a giveaway to evil multinational corporations and “the rich.”

But nowhere is the handwringing more anguished than in progressive Portland, Oregon. Why? One little-noticed provision in the new law slashes the excise tax in half on the first 60,000 barrels of beer produced by companies that make fewer than two million barrels a year. That’s a boon to Portland’s beloved craft beer industry.

The city’s alternative magazine,

*Willamette Week*, estimates that Oregon’s 230 craft breweries will save \$210,000 each in 2018, thanks to the tax break. And that’s leading to some uncomfortable questions in a state reflexively hostile to Republicans. As *Willamette Week* puts it: “In left-leaning, beer-guzzling Portland, the tax cut places craft brewers in an awkward position.”

Yet the position apparently isn’t so awk-



ward that brewers are taking a principled stand and sending more money than required to Washington: “I don’t think anyone’s going to thumb their nose at it,” Ben Edmunds, brewmaster at Portland’s Breakside Brewery, told the publication. Instead, brewers said they’re inclined to “spend their windfall on new employees and tanks.”

Let’s all raise a glass to that. ♦

## Which Witchhunt?

If you've been following British politics in recent years, you know that one of the reasons Tories have dominated in spite of less-than-stellar leadership is that the Labour party is even worse, having handed over the reins to a bunch of anti-Semitic loons. There's been a campaign to expel the worst elements from Labour, but that's been met with internal resistance, and the British left still has a long way to go before this is all sorted out. As Dave Rich, author of *The Left's Jewish Problem: Jeremy Corbyn, Israel & Antisemitism*, recently reported on Twitter:

The campaign to oppose expelling antisemites from the Labour Party ("Labour Against the Witchhunt") has taken another twist. Bear with me, it's a good one. . . . Labour Against the Witchhunt have a meeting on Saturday [January 6] to call for "the immediate lifting of all suspensions and expulsions from Labour Party membership which were . . . connected to the 'anti-Semitism' smear campaign." Except this campaign also wants to expel some of its own members for being antisemitic: so Saturday's meeting will oppose expulsions for antisemitism while also carrying out expulsions for antisemitism. Wait, it gets better . . .

One of the people to be expelled from the campaign on Saturday is Gerry "Jewish Question" Downing. He is angry about this so he has set up his own campaign called "Reject Bogus Left Antisemitism." Now for the genius bit: Reject Bogus Left Antisemitism is having its own meeting on Saturday \*in the same pub\* as Labour Against the Witchhunt. Same day, same time, same place, same subject—but on opposing sides. Only the hard left could do this: a witchhunt against the witchhunt against the



*Splitter!*



witchhunt. "You're an antisemite!" "You're a Zionist!" "Smear!" "Splitter!" Etc. These are people who share obsessive hatred of Zionism and contempt for most Jews. Meanwhile 95 percent of the Jewish community thinks they are all antisemites anyway, takes one look and goes to a different pub. Happy New Year!

We appreciate Rich's sense of the absurd in all this. "Splitter!" is a reference to a decades-old Monty Python bit about the factionalism of revolutionary left-wing groups that's remarkably still appropriate. And we would join in the laughter were it not so disturbing to see a major European political party unable to make up its mind about anti-Semitism. ♦

## A Little More Opacity, Please

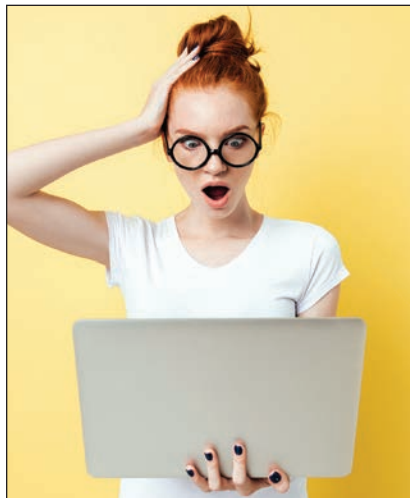
"The thing I really care about is the mission, making the world open," said Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg eight years ago. "A lot of times, I run a thought experiment, 'If I were not at Facebook, what would I be doing to make the world more open?'"

That was back when the world was young, when new web platforms known as "social media" seemed to augur a world of blissful transparency and happy connectedness. Just occasionally we remember the old

CORBYN: RWENDLAND

optimism, as when people around the world witness the Iran protests as they're happening on Twitter, Facebook, and newer platforms. But most of us, we suspect, now take a dimmer view of social media.

Facebook in particular has had a tough time in more recent days. Many Democrats, including a number of U.S. senators, have all but blamed the tech company for Donald Trump's 2016 victory. Face-



Thanks for all the openness

book and its subsidiary Instagram, the argument goes, left themselves open (that word again!) to armies of Kremlin-connected trolls intent on spreading lies about Hillary Clinton and so helped tip the Electoral College to Trump.

Then in late December we had a far more distressing glimpse of Facebook's inner workings. "The Worst Job in Tech: Staring at Human Depravity to Keep It Off Facebook," read the *Wall Street Journal* headline. The piece explains the daily tasks of some 7,500 "content moderators" or "content reviewers" working for the Menlo Park, Calif.-based tech giant. The job of these moderators is to monitor Facebook posts and block offensive material. "Coping mechanisms among content moderators," we learn, "included a dark sense of humor and swiveling around in their chairs to commiserate after a particularly disturbing post."

Most of these moderators are not

Facebook employees but contract workers. We can see why. They don't last long in the job. "Former content moderators recall having to view images of war victims who had been gutted or drowned and child soldiers engaged in killings. One former Facebook moderator reviewed a video of a cat being thrown into a microwave. Workers sometimes quit on their first or second day. Some leave for lunch and never come back. Others remain unsettled by the work—and what they saw as a lack of emotional support or appreciation—long after they quit."

The biggest problem: There's so much content to ban. Vile posts appear faster than moderators can keep up, and technology isn't much help. "Humans, still, are the first line of defense. Facebook, YouTube and other companies are racing to develop algorithms and artificial-intelligence tools, but much of that technology is years away from replacing people."

Other tech companies—Apple, YouTube, Twitter—hire unknown numbers of content moderators. At Facebook, moderators "can have as many as three face-to-face counseling sessions a year arranged by an employee-assistance program."

As for Zuckerberg, he says he's "dead serious" about dealing with the problem of filtering out repellent content—the sinister, racist, disgusting, and otherwise morally debased content human beings are unfortunately capable of producing in vast quantities. We wish him the best of luck. At least take comfort in the fact that he's made the world more open. ♦

## Memorable Corrections

An earlier version of the story misidentified the fictional character name [Steve] Bannon uses to refer to Jared Kushner as Frodo, a "Lord of the Rings" reference, rather than Fredo, a reference to "The Godfather."

("Bannon was shot on the South Lawn and run over by a tank": How the Bannon-Trump alliance collapsed," *Politico*, January 3, 2018.) ♦

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## Bring Out Your Dead

Journalists like anniversaries, or at least this one does, and 2018 is an ideal vantage point from which to survey the past. It's been a half-century now since the *annus horribilis* of 1968, for example, and a century-and-a-half since my favorite president (James Buchanan) died. But more to the point, this month marks the centennial of much the worst pandemic in modern history: the 1918 influenza epidemic.

In a century of man-made and natural disasters, it might be champion. To be sure, the Black Death of the middle 14th century was more devastating: The mortality rate from that decade-long outbreak of bubonic plague is believed to have been somewhere between 70 million and 200 million people worldwide—approximately half the population of Europe perished—while the influenza epidemic of 1918 killed about 75 million in a two-year period.

What makes the 1918 pandemic of interest, however, is its startling proximity to our own time—more about that in a moment—and the sheer determination with which it's been reduced to footnote status in common memory.

Part of the reason for that, I suppose, is the contributing (and coincidental) factor of World War I. The two successive strains of the virus that attacked a half-billion people in 1918-20, and killed about a fifth of the world's population, emerged toward the end of the carnage on the Western Front and might well have been aggravated by the concentration of troops in camp and battle. It's worth noting that considerably more people died in six months from influenza around the world than were killed during four years in the trenches.

In the United States, it was first detected in March 1918 among soldiers at Fort Riley, Kansas, and with disconcerting speed spread far beyond military outposts into the general population. Before long the epidemic was in New York City. Remote villages and mighty metropolises were equally besieged, and the peculiar character of the virus—it seemed to overstimulate immune reactions—was, paradoxically, more lethal to the young and healthy than the old and weak.



*The St. Louis Red Cross motor corps with ambulances, 1918*

Parents sent their children away to avoid contagion and then promptly died; households and whole blocks and neighborhoods were quarantined. And while public officials struggled to comprehend the calamity, daily life in certain cities and regions ground to a halt. Overnight, life expectancy in America dropped a dozen years.

Indeed, with an estimated 600,000 fatalities, it is very likely that every family in the United States at the time (population 100 million) was somehow affected. This was brought home to me, in a characteristically casual way, several decades ago.

As a schoolboy I had seen a photograph of people in Washington, circa 1918, gathered along a sidewalk, all hidden behind face masks. When I asked my father about this, he explained that there had been an influenza epidemic, and, at its height, such

precautions were commonplace, especially in cities. When it struck, he was 10 years old and recalled the closure of schools in Philadelphia (where his family lived), the morbid silence of the streets, and the death of a handful of classmates in the American city most adversely affected by the pandemic.

That last detail prompted an obvious inquiry about *his* family—and the answer was startling. I cannot now remember whether my father, too, had been stricken, although I would guess that he had, as my mother (four years younger and several miles away) had been in her own family. He mentioned that his infant brother, born the previous December, had come

close to dying, but that his uncle—one of his mother's two younger siblings, who lived at the same address—had not been so fortunate.

When he died, the family's capacity to act was stymied by illness and Philadelphia's paralysis. But the following morning the city sent a horse-drawn cart down Chancellor Street, where my grandparents lived, to collect bodies; and my great-uncle's corpse was trans-

ported to a common burial ground, location unknown.

Those carts, in my father's recollection, had become a familiar specter—and of course would have been equally familiar to inhabitants of a medieval town during the Black Death. The centuries, as it were, melted away.

My father, I should mention, was a microbiologist and was occasionally prompted to reflect on the conquest of disease in his lifetime (he died in 1974) and the progress in public health to which he had contributed. That such a spectacle, such a scene drawn from Dante or Dickens, as death in a plague year and horse-drawn oblivion should have taken place within living memory would have surely struck him as reason enough to remember one centennial this season.

PHILIP TERZIAN

# A Deafening Silence

The American left has always been more comfortable with domestic policy than foreign. Progressives are happy to talk about injustice at home. But what about injustice abroad? Are there circumstances in which the United States can use its power and influence to advance justice or to check repression in a foreign country? Modern American liberals don't have enough faith in our country to think we have the right, or even the ability, to lead other peoples toward worthier forms of governance. They fall back on rejectionism—rejection of militarism, rejection of imperialism, rejection of American “arrogance.” No dictatorial regime is ever odious enough, no threat to the interests of the United States or our allies sufficiently egregious to warrant decisive action.

“Over many years and many occasions, this negative argument is certain to be right some of the time,” the liberal intellectual Michael Walzer remarks in his new book *A Foreign Policy for the Left*. “But when reiterated pretty much all the time, it amounts to a questionable demand for inwardness. Arguing against this imperial aggression or that military adventure, we regularly insist that our country should avoid all engagements abroad and devote its energy and resources to creating a more just society here at home.”

This proclivity was in the making long before the rise of Barack Obama, but his presidency led the American left into permanent inertia. Obama's foreign-policy officials considered themselves masters of pragmatism, the opposite of their “neoconservative” forerunners. Mainly this meant refusing to use American power to counter tyranny and oppression abroad. Instead they dithered, engaging in endless rounds of deal-broking.

The most famous of their agreements is the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran. It has now been so thoroughly discredited that almost its only defenders are the Obama administration officials behind it. The mullahs never had any intention of abiding by their promises—Iranian officials were caught trying to buy banned ballistic-missile devices almost as soon as the ink was dry, and the regime has never allowed nuclear inspectors the full access to its facilities stipulated in the deal. Perhaps the worst part of the deal, though, is that the United States freed roughly \$100 billion in frozen

Iranian assets, money Obama insisted would benefit the Iranian people. It has, instead, in large measure been used to fund the regime's military adventurism in Gaza, Syria, and Yemen.

To achieve this folly of a deal, the Obama administration kept almost totally silent about the Green Revolution that swept Iran after the stolen presidential election of 2009. Even more ignoble was Obama's silence as the Iranian government supplied Bashar al-Assad with the means to slaughter entire populations in Syria—in some cases with chemical weapons. Obama knew that to intervene directly would have upset the Iranians and jeopardized the nuclear agreement.

And so perhaps it's not such a surprise to witness the post-Obama left's near-total incapacity to offer so much as a heartfelt cheer for the Iranian protesters who again have taken to the streets. These men and women are demanding a say in their political future. They are opposing a government that imprisons its critics, oppresses women, and

abetts genocide. There is nothing about these protests that should give American liberals the slightest cause for ambivalence. Everything about their worldview—their fervent belief in the equality of women and minorities, in the superiority of secular government over theocracy, in the rights of free speech and free assembly—should impel them to cheer the Iranian protesters and back any effort to advance their cause.

Yet we hear hardly a word.

Crippled by self-doubt, beguiled by Obama into thinking every malevolent actor can be pacified through superior negotiating skills, American liberals have lost any moral impulse. They seem to have returned to the perverse anti-communism of the Cold War, when America's enemies were always at least half-right and always had to be negotiated with, never confronted or criticized.

So as we watch videos of brave Iranians risking imprisonment and death by demanding the abolition of a quasi-police state run by religious zealots, liberal intellectuals are defensive and quiet. Samantha Power, Obama's ambassador to the U.N. and long ago a strong proponent of humanitarian interventionism, confined herself to a snarky shot at Donald Trump on Twitter. Ben Rhodes, Obama's foreign-policy adviser, dourly pointed out that “it seems lost



June 2009: Shouting in Iran, silence in Washington

on too many” that events in Iran are “about what Iranians want for Iran, and not about us.” In the *New York Times*, Obama’s national security adviser Susan Rice counseled the Trump administration to keep quiet about the protests. Thomas Erdbrink, the *New York Times*’s Tehran bureau chief, downplayed the protests and even complained on Twitter that it is “hard to report” because “my driver is afraid his car will be vandalized.”

How strange that by comparison with many American liberal commentators and intellectuals, the nationalist and intermittently isolationist Donald Trump sounds like a thoroughgoing humanitarian: “Big protests in Iran,” the president tweeted on New Year’s Eve. “The people are finally getting wise as to how their money and wealth

is being stolen and squandered on terrorism. Looks like they will not take it any longer. The USA is watching very closely for human rights violations!”

American liberals, it would seem, are internationalists only if it means handing over U.S. sovereignty to transnational organizations like the United Nations or the International Criminal Court. If it means confronting the globe’s most powerful and repressive thugs, or even offering a hurrah for the subjects who stand up to them, they fall quiet. American liberals have in essence become cynical “realists”—little Kissingers without the learning or foresight.

Liberal internationalism is dead, along with a great many Syrians and other innocents. Brutalized populations will need to look elsewhere for help. ♦

## A Republican Win in Utah

The Senate’s longest-serving Republican, Orrin Hatch of Utah, has announced that he will not seek reelection. Mitt Romney, as *THE WEEKLY STANDARD* was first to confirm, intends to run for the seat. This news item provoked a characteristically fevered round of speculation and theorizing from the Washington commentariat. Among the questions gleefully debated: Could Utah turn into another Alabama and produce a Democratic senator representing a deep-red state?

The answer to that one is no. Mitt Romney is very popular in Utah—he won the state in 2012 by 48 points, and a November poll had him winning a Senate race with a similar 72 percent of the vote. Romney is a disciplined politician and a decent man; he is no Roy Moore, who was a weak candidate to begin with and quickly became dramatically, hopelessly weaker. Romney has already weathered a full presidential election. Whatever could be found out about him by diligent reporting has been found out.

The far more salient point is that the outgoing senator is a Trump ally and his likely replacement is not. Hatch’s poll numbers are abysmally bad—according to a poll conducted last fall, 75 percent of Utah voters want Hatch to retire—even though he has vehemently supported Donald Trump. That’s precisely the opposite of what happened with Jeff Flake. When the Arizona senator announced his intention not to run for reelection last October—his numbers, too, made victory look close to impossible—we were assured that it was Flake’s criticisms of Donald Trump that led to his loss of support. The media’s preferred interpretation: The GOP was now in thrall to Trump, and with Trump’s approval rates hov-

ering in the 30s, Republicans were headed for certain electoral destruction in 2018.

There is some truth in this interpretation. Trump is unpopular with the large majority of voters, and although sounding pro-Trump may help a Republican to squeak past a primary challenger, it will hurt him in the general election. That’s more or less what happened in the Virginia governor’s race. But in Utah a strident Trump ally—Hatch has praised the president repeatedly, and Trump lobbied the senator hard to run for reelection—is stepping down because he can’t win even as one of the president’s fiercest critics on the right appears to be the likely replacement.

Utah controverts the assumption that Republican voters want their candidates and officeholders to show fealty to Donald Trump. *Vox*’s Matthew Yglesias, for example, contends that “one of Trump’s most underappreciated political achievements” is the “consolidation of power over a party to which he had scant personal or institutional ties.”

One of the problems with that assumption, of course, is that those who make it confuse being “pro-Trump” with holding traditional Republican opinions. Progressive commentators, for instance, faulted Republicans on the Hill for “supporting Trump” by voting for the tax bill, as if they’re supposed to have abandoned long-held beliefs in order to prove their independence from Trump.

We don’t minimize the electoral problem Donald Trump presents to Republicans wishing to run as conservatives. He is a liability in elections. But Utah reminds us that Donald Trump does not own the Republican party. It’s not at all clear that he *wants* to own the Republican party. What’s clear, as ever, is that principled conservatism will win elections. ♦



*Retiring and aspiring*

ORRIN HATCH: AARON P. BERNSTEIN / BLOOMBERG / GETTY; MITT ROMNEY: THEO WARGO / NBC / GETTY

STEPHEN F. HAYES

# Situation All Fouled Up, Not Normal

There was a moment at the end of 2017 when, if you squinted hard enough, it seemed as though the Trump presidency might be approaching normal.

Republicans in Congress had passed tax reform. The economy had grown at more than 3 percent for a second consecutive quarter. Unemployment was down. Stock markets were up. The president was at Mar-a-Lago, mostly avoiding making headlines. He was golfing, basking equally in the Florida sunshine and in plaudits from supporters and even some longtime critics.

For all of the worry, these folks argued in unison, Trump had turned out to be a pretty conventional Republican president. Commentators who once called Trump a cancer on the Republican party were enthusiastically praising his policy accomplishments. His leadership was hailed. He was favorably compared to Ronald Reagan. There were predictions that his good month might even portend electoral success in the 2018 midterms.

No doubt some of those who made these arguments believed them with great conviction. Others sounded like they were trying to persuade themselves as much as they were their TV audiences.

It's true that Trump had some real accomplishments in 2017. But there's still nothing normal about his presidency—a fact that was made abundantly clear less than 72 hours into 2018.

On January 2, Trump tweeted a nonsensical attack on his own Justice Department and, implicitly, the leaders he handpicked, as captives of the

Deep State. The president seems to believe justice will be thwarted unless Hillary Clinton, Huma Abedin, and James Comey soon find themselves in jail. Or, as he prefers: "Jail!"

Almost exactly 12 hours later came a Trump tweet taunting the unstable leader of a nuclear-capable rogue state. Apparently Kim Jong-un's nuclear



**So the president wants a book banned. He wants a political opponent in jail and, for good measure, maybe the former FBI director. He thinks his former top adviser is insane. This isn't normal.**

"button" isn't as big as Trump's. That's really what he said. In between, Trump took shots at the "failing *New York Times*" (despite record numbers of subscriptions and digital ad revenues) and suggested, fancifully, that he was responsible for a year of aviation travel without a fatality.

The next day, an excerpt from a forthcoming book by Michael Wolff appeared online. Wolff, who had nearly unfettered access to Trump's inner circle for the better part of a year, quoted former White House adviser Steve Bannon accusing Trump's son of treason for meeting with shady Russian sources. In response, the president released a statement—an official White House statement—claiming that Bannon, a man he had trusted to run his political operation, was not of sound mind. Donald Trump Jr. took

to Twitter to trash Bannon. Among his most ferocious attacks came one on Bannon's political acuity, citing as evidence the former Trump adviser's support of Roy Moore's losing Senate candidacy in Alabama and eliding, for convenience, the fact that the president endorsed and campaigned for Moore, too, despite plausible accusations he had sexually assaulted teen girls. Later that evening, Trump's lawyer sent a letter to Bannon demanding that the former aide stop criticizing the president, citing a campaign non-disclosure agreement.

Trump has a long history of threatening lawsuits—not for legal reasons, of course, but for political and psychological ones. Trump frequently threatens to sue those who frustrate him—the *New York Times* (for publishing the accounts of women who'd accused him of sexual impropriety), the women themselves (for "lying"), the makers of an anti-Trump ad on veterans (for saying he didn't love the veterans when he really did love the veterans), Ted Cruz (over his citizenship), the Club for Growth (for ads in Iowa he didn't like). Trump was seeking less to silence Bannon than to remind him of the consequences of leaving the circle.

Bannon knows a lot, perhaps more than anyone other than Trump family members, and he is tentatively scheduled to testify before the House Intelligence Committee on January 11. What's more, Bannon has long privately expressed concerns about Trump's dealings with Russians. If Trump's goal was to neuter Bannon, to bring him back in line, it seems to have worked. "The president of the United States is a great man," Bannon said, shortly after the letter went out. "You know I support him day in and day out."

The following morning, Trump

lawyers sent a letter to the book's publisher threatening legal action and demanding it cease publication immediately.

So the president wants a book banned. He wants a political opponent in jail and, for good measure, maybe the former FBI director, too. He thinks his former top adviser is insane.

This isn't normal. And it's not just "Trump being Trump," the preferred dodge of elected Republicans. It's a reflection of the president's troubled mind and of his erratic, irrational judgment.

Trump's media defenders will tell us, once again, that he was joking, that we shouldn't pay attention to his antics. Seriously not literally and all that bunk. And they'll point, once again, to tax reform and Justice Neil Gorsuch.

I'm glad Trump signed tax reform that Republicans in Congress have been working on for years. I'm glad he's taken the advice of Federalist Society leaders and nominated conservatives rather than liberals to the courts. And I'm glad he's listening to conservatives who have long advocated giving the administrative state a trim.

But this is a president who played a mine-is-bigger-than-yours game in public with the leader of a rogue nuclear state. This is something more than abnormal; it's dangerous.

We were lucky in 2017. The United States didn't face a crisis that required presidential leadership. We didn't have to have the sober judgment of a thoughtful statesman. We won't be lucky forever. ♦



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COMMENT ♦ WILLIAM KRISTOL

## Functioning Amid Hubbub

Let's not kid ourselves: It's a weird time in our nation's capital.

It's exciting. You read, first with some curiosity, then with rising interest, and finally with increasing enthusiasm, about the protests in Iran. You call up friends in the think-tank world to try to get a handle on what's going on. You speak with past and present government officials and Hill staffers to try to figure out what we could do. You encourage some of them to write up their suggestions publicly and others to share ideas privately. You counsel them not to relitigate the fights of the past but to try to build as broad a consensus as possible, without diluting the policy too much. You attend a meeting or two, and mostly listen as people who know more than you

debate some tough tactical and strategic choices. You try to give a boost to the ideas that seem sensible on Twitter and fight back against counsels of passivity or various forms of foolishness on TV. And while the administration in power isn't one you think highly of, nor one you get along with particularly well, it looks to you, a few days into the crisis, that parts of the government are getting their act together and that the president's instincts seem to be broadly sound.

And it's depressing. Because you can't go long without being reminded it's Donald Trump's Washington. Hopes for bipartisanship are set back by gratuitous remarks about Hillary Clinton. Hopes for sober policy-making are called into question by a cavalier tweet about nuclear war in North Korea. Disputes over possible scandals and petty politics fill the airwaves. It becomes clear the White House—or

at least the president—is more focused on dealing with rude remarks by Steve Bannon than with extraordinary possibilities in Iran.

So hubbub—and a rather low and distasteful hubbub—seems to prevail. And you can't simply ignore the hub-



**In the utter chaos of the last year of the Nixon administration, advisers from inside and outside the White House prevailed on the president to send arms to an Israel under attack.**

bub. Some of the scandals may be real. The potential damage to government institutions and democratic norms could be significant. Questions of character can't simply be put aside. To all of this, attention must be paid.

How? Leo Strauss asserted that "it is safer to understand the low in the light of the high than the high in the light of the low. In doing the latter one necessarily distorts the high, whereas in doing the former one does not deprive the low of the freedom to reveal itself fully as what it is."

But what is safer in the realm of understanding is not necessarily what is possible in the world of practice. If the low is real, one can't wish it away. If low politics threatens to make it impossible to achieve the high goals of statesmanship, one has to address the low, contain it, or perhaps improve it.

In other words, one can't just deal with Iran and ignore Trump. But one

also shouldn't obsess about Trump and neglect the challenges and opportunities of Iran.

After all, isn't it in a way the same fight? Defending constitutional norms and the habits of freedom and self-government at home is the flip side of trying to help others establish those norms and develop those habits abroad.

This means that political actors other than the president of the United States need to step up. Administration officials need to develop policy in the midst of distractions and execute it as well as possible in an atmosphere of chaos. Members of Congress have to lead rather than follow, shape policy rather than simply react to it. Outside experts with good ideas and citizens with sound judgments have to assert themselves and be unafraid to make a difference in ways that they probably wouldn't in more normal times.

In the utter chaos of the last year of the Nixon administration, advisers from inside and outside the White House prevailed on the president to send arms to an Israel that was under attack. Israel won the Yom Kippur War. The administration was then able to begin a process of moving the Soviet Union out of Egypt, and more broadly out of much of the Middle East, in ways that paid off just a few years later. Meanwhile, some senators and congressmen, over the objections of the administration, were able to insist on putting human rights at the center of U.S. policy towards the Soviet Union. This too paid off in a big way 15 years later.

There were, needless to say, significant costs that we and the world paid for the turmoil of 1973-74. But we made it through, and we even accomplished things along the way. This was a testament to the American system of government, which proved resilient and strong, and to the American people, who didn't lose their bearings. But it was also a testament to particular individuals, in government and out, some famous and many forgotten, who did their duty in a moment of distraction and confusion on the one hand and crisis and opportunity on the other. ♦

COMMENT ♦ FRED BARNES

## It's a Long Time to November

The optimism of Democrats about the midterm election is based on the assumption that political conditions won't change between now and November 6. Indeed, some of them won't.

One thing sure not to change is history. There's a longstanding rule: The party without the White House has the advantage in a president's first midterm. Democrats lost 63 House seats in President Obama's first one in 2010. The 2002 election was the only recent exception. That was the post-9/11 election when George W. Bush was president. Republicans won two Senate and eight House seats.

The woeful approval rating of President Trump is also likely to be cooked in the midterm cake. It's tied to Trump's personal traits and unpleasant behavior. Though a majority of Americans find them distasteful, Trump hasn't flinched. He's as disagreeable as ever.

That the media will be on the side of Democrats is another certainty. That applies to all elections, not just midterms. This means the elite press will take its cues from Democrats. Whatever Democrats focus on, the media will focus on.

But that's not all that favors Democrats. In November, Democrats won the governor's race and a shocking number of legislative seats in Virginia. Loathing of Trump was the catalyst for what I'd call a mini-wave election.

Just as encouraging to Democrats was an NBC News/*Wall Street Journal*

poll on the preference of voters for election of a Democratic or Republican Congress in November. It's a poll Republican operatives believe isn't rigged. They take it seriously. Democrats were preferred by 50 to 39 percent, a margin consistent with a Democratic landslide.

As you might expect, all this has sent Democrats, both elected officials and the rank and file, into a tizzy. And as Dan Balz of the *Washington Post* noted, there's "a growing consensus, or at least a rising chorus among the political class, proclaiming a tsunami-in-the-making across America."

But hold on! That's not the end of the story in 2018. There's more to elections than a few perennial factors. Not everything will be working on behalf of a Democratic victory next fall.

The biggest drag on their prospects is Democrats themselves, their tactics and their policies. They have allowed their anti-Trump feelings to get out of hand. The party's liberal base now casts itself as the Resistance. And their chosen tactic, as if they were the Sandinistas of North America, is to resist everything associated with Trump and Republicans in even the tiniest of ways.

This got them nowhere in 2017 and threatens to prevent them from having an impact in Washington this year as well. In Congress, they harass Republicans, slowing down approval of Trump administration officials and judges.

On tax reform, they insisted on veto power over any provision. Republicans weren't about to accept that,

### Worth Repeating from *WeeklyStandard.com*

'New Yorkers will recognize the CFPB story as the classic narrative of a rent-controlled apartment. Democrats passed a law that made it nearly impossible to evict the bureau's director, illegally installed a family member, and pocketed his under-the-table kickbacks for years.'

—Ronald L. Rubin, 'Donald Trump Evicted Elizabeth Warren from the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau'

as Democrats must have known. The result was that Democrats played no part in drafting the bill. Not only did blue states suffer, but the individual mandate was eliminated from Obamacare, nearly crippling it.

Last fall, Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer and House minority leader Nancy Pelosi met with Trump to discuss the Dreamers brought here as children by their illegal immigrant parents. Trump offered legal status in exchange for building his wall on the southwest border. Democrats refused and made no counteroffer. Rather than compromise, they gave up.

Democrats lack an agenda. The liberal policies they defend vociferously are those most unpopular with voters, such as sanctuary cities, more immigration, fewer pipelines, LGBT issues.

Mitch McConnell, the Senate majority leader, says this year Repub-



**Voters may get tired of listening to anti-Trump tirades. And Democratic hysteria over tax reform may backfire when paychecks next month have less withheld in taxes.**

licans will be “looking for bipartisan agreement because that’s the way the Senate is.” He wants Republicans to be seen as ready to operate across party aisles. Democrats also say they want to, but their anti-Trump obsession makes this all but impossible.

Their two campaign targets are Trump and tax reform. Both are problematic. The president will never be lovable, but voters may get tired of listening to anti-Trump tirades. And

Democratic hysteria over tax reform may backfire when paychecks next month reveal less withheld in taxes.

To promote tax reform, a powerful rebuttal of Democrats is circulating among Republicans in Washington. It would have the GOP elevate tax reform as the paramount issue in the midterm campaign. Democrats would find this unthinkable, since they are persuaded by polls showing Republican tax policy to be unpopular. But the polls are soft and susceptible to being flipped.

A tax-cut crusade is not an unheard of idea for Republicans. Led by Jack Kemp in 1978 and Ronald Reagan in 1981 and 1986, they championed supply-side tax cuts that spurred economic growth and job creation. The result was a party realignment with Republicans the beneficiary.

Too farfetched for 2018? I don’t think so. And if taxes are the centerpiece of the State of the Union address later this month, we’ll know Trump doesn’t either. ♦

## New Year, New Tax Reality

**THOMAS J. DONOHUE**  
PRESIDENT AND CEO  
U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

On New Year’s Day, the American people awoke to a new tax code and a brighter economic future. Increased business optimism, higher wages, and holiday bonuses were among the immediate effects of the tax reform legislation signed into law on December 22. But the greatest impact will become clear over the long term: a stronger, more innovative, and faster growing American economy.

In the more than 30 years since Congress last reformed the tax code, the economy has transformed dramatically with a greater emphasis on global commerce and digital technologies. Our outdated tax laws were a drag on our ability to innovate and adapt to these changes. Businesses were subjected to some of the highest tax rates in the developed world, were punished with double taxation when they participated in the global economy, and were unable

to expense much of the investment needed to grow and innovate. All of that ended with this much-needed reform.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce fought for years to accomplish many of the changes President Trump signed into law last month. While the final bill isn’t perfect, it represents the kind of bold and forward-looking reform we need on both the individual and business side of the tax code. It cuts rates for businesses of all kinds, allows for full expensing of investments, and establishes an internationally competitive tax system.

What does this mean for the big picture? It means growth: in the short term and long term. In the short term, with more cash in businesses’ coffers and more hope for the future, many companies are taking immediate and extraordinary steps to benefit workers. Some, including AT&T and Sinclair Broadcast Group, announced generous bonuses to thousands of employees. Others, such as Wells Fargo and Washington Federal, announced

permanent raises. And others, such as Boeing, pledged investments in their communities, workplaces, or workforces.

Tax reform’s greatest impact goes far beyond these immediate steps, manifesting itself in more business investment, increased capacity, better jobs, rising wages, and a more competitive and successful American economy. The Chamber was proud to lead the business community’s efforts to overcome the doubters and pass tax reform. We worked with lawmakers, coordinated with state and local chambers around the country, ran advertisements, and much more.

It is our sincere hope and firm expectation that this new year and new tax code will bring success and prosperity to all Americans—from entrepreneurs to workers to our great global competitors to the small businesses that form the bedrock of their communities.



Learn more at  
[uschamber.com/abovethefold](https://www.uschamber.com/abovethefold).



*Iranian students scuffle with police at the University of Tehran, December 30, 2017.*

# The Crack-up of Theocracy

Can Iran's clerical regime survive?

BY REUEL MARC GERECHT

It is odd to hear Westerners, hopelessly permeated with Marxism, dissect the nationwide Iranian protests as primarily an economic eruption, the suggestion being that the demonstrators are not *that* dyspeptic about the nature of the Islamic Republic. The *New York Times's* Thomas Erdbrink, the Dutch foreign correspondent posted to Tehran who works in an impossible position since he and his Iranian wife could be booted, arrested, or separated at any time, first pushed the theme of economic dissatisfaction. In Washington, ardent fans of Barack Obama's nuclear deal echoed it loudly. It's not hard to see why. Strategically, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action is premised on the assumption that economic rewards from the lifting of sanctions will go partly to the "good guys" in

the Islamic Republic, that is, President Hassan Rouhani and his circle, who will use returning oil wealth to strengthen pragmatism and moderation among the ruling elite. The sunset clauses in the nuclear deal don't make much sense, and the restrictions on advanced centrifuges begin coming off in six years, if the theocracy remains aggressive. When Iranian demonstrators chant "Death to Khamenei! Death to Rouhani! Death to the Islamic Republic!" as swarms of them have, there's no longer reason to hope that giving money to Rouhani's "cause" via the JCPOA will help, not hurt, the Iranian people.

Economics and politics are, of course, always intertwined. Politics and God unavoidably intersect. And threaded around and through everything in Iran is an ever-evolving Islamic culture, which, if one follows the anxious writings of the supreme leader Ali Khamenei and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards, is in trouble.

We are not watching in Iran the aftershocks of an increase in the price of eggs and poultry in Khorasan Province. We are watching the continuing crack-up of theocracy, which for the ruling elite was the entire point of the Islamic revolution. What we are seeing in provincial cities, which is where this latest eruption of discontent started, is the expansion of the anti-regime critiques that started in Tehran even before the death in 1989 of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the revolution's founding father and the first true Muslim theocrat since the collapse of the Shiite Fatimid caliphate in Egypt in 1171.

If we look back to the late 1980s, when the revolutionary esprit had been badly battered by the killing fields of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) and by the brutality of Khomeini's police state, we can see the spiritual, political, and economic cracks in the regime that today have turned into chasms. The treasure trove of vignettes in *Téhéran, au dessous du volcan* (*Tehran, Under the Volcano*), a little masterpiece published in 1987 about the anger, pride, and faith that made the revolution, and the disappointment, individuality, and yearning for happiness that were unmaking it, wasn't unique to the capital. Although there are stark differences between provincial Iran and the all-consuming capital (the pull of Tehran in the Islamic Republic is similar to the centripetal eminence of Paris in France), it's the similarities that are more interesting.

The rest of Iran is becoming like Tehran. Large-scale urbanization, which started under Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, has gained enormous speed under the mullahs. The big provincial cities have an added accelerant for discontent: They are not Tehran, with its capacity to take the largest share of the country's wealth. Upper- and middle-class Tehranis may rarely travel to the provinces; provincials who have the means regularly go to the megalopolis. Rapidly improving handheld communications and better transportation have also cut down the size of the country. The great revolutionary foundations and *owqaf* trusts, charities

*Reuel Marc Gerecht, a contributing editor, is a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.*

historically built upon land bequests, have essentially become mafia networks, inevitably under the control of the politicized, corrupt ruling clergy, ultimately under the guidance of the supreme leader and those mullahs he trusts. In many parts of the country, they dominate economic life. In other words, the Islamic Republic's tyranny has become as acute outside of Tehran as it is in the capital. For those cities where large, potentially troublesome minorities live—Kurds, Arabs, and even Azeri Turks—the police state has always been vigilant. The clerics have improved upon the Pahlavi shahs' love of centralizing, surveilling authority.

And the growth of universities in the provinces, perhaps more than any other factor, has made these cities powder kegs. Standards at Iranian universities have fallen drastically since 1979; the number of Iranians who have gone to college, however, is now in the millions. Even under the shah, Iranian families that had never known a college graduate were obsessed with the idea of university educations for their children. The Islamic revolution put these egalitarian aspirations into overdrive. According to official Iranian statistics, in 1970, there were 67,286 students enrolled in higher education. By 1991, that number had climbed to 514,000; by 2014, the number was 4,367,901. The Islamic Republic is pushing into the job market roughly 1 to 1.5 million college graduates per year. As with the capital, provincial cities are flooded with these graduates, many of whom cannot find jobs or are doing jobs that make them indistinguishable from the non-college-educated unemployed and working poor. In 2011, 22 percent of the graduates in engineering were unemployed; for the biological sciences, the figure is 26 percent, and for computer sciences, 30 percent.

The ramifications of the overeducated-and-unemployed are likely lethal to the regime: It's one criterion we can use to pinpoint political dissidence—for example, self-identification with the Green Movement, which exploded into massive pro-democracy demonstrations in Tehran in 2009, correlates closely with higher education. And

the frustrations and anger of the college-educated inevitably seep into the entire society, first and foremost via their families and extended families. The differences in attitudes of the college- and non-college-educated jobless and underemployed toward the theocracy may be far less than the regime, and many Western journalists and scholars, has assumed.

**The great revolutionary foundations and charities, historically built upon land bequests, have essentially become mafia networks, inevitably under the control of the politicized, corrupt ruling clergy. In many parts of the country, they dominate economic life. In other words, the Islamic Republic's tyranny has become as acute outside of Tehran as it is in the capital.**

Since the contested 2009 presidential election, which Khamenei and senior Revolutionary Guard commanders have described as a near-death experience, the regime has desperately wanted to believe that the poor—the *mostazafan*, “the oppressed” in revolutionary lingo—have remained true to the cause. The provincial protests have shattered that confidence. That the anti-regime chants of the provincial youth are aimed against the theocracy's adventures in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon must be especially disconcerting. The regime's internal propaganda about their foreign missions—an effort to cast Iranian foreign policy as a call to save Shiite Muslims from Saudi-, U.S.-, and Zionist-supported Sunni extremists—is aimed mostly at lower-class Iranians in whom Shiism and Iranian nationalism are tightly intertwined. Going abroad to protect Shiites should, in theory, strongly resonate among the faithful in a time of

intensifying Sunni-Shiite antipathy, certainly more strongly than the old revolutionary music about protecting all Muslims from Western imperialism. Yet the provincials don't appear to be buying it. The famous anti-regime chant of 2009 has resurfaced with a vengeance: “*Na Ghazeh, Na Lobnan, janam feda-ye Iran,*” “Not for Gaza, not for Lebanon, I sacrifice my life only for Iran.” This might also mean that the domestic audience for the regime's nonstop anti-Semitism and anti-Israeli propaganda is not as large as some have feared.

Ultimately, the clerical regime can only survive if it can replicate its creed among enough young men who supply the muscle for the primary security institutions, the Revolutionary Guard Corps and its Basij, the “mobilization” force of lower-class, club-wielding thugs who maintain public mores. So far, the theocracy has been able to do this even though higher up, in the clerical seminaries, there has been a precipitous drop in enrollment.

In 2009 when the regime was on the brink, Guard commanders moved Basij units from outside Tehran into the capital. It also appears they deployed a substantial number of Turkish-speaking Azeri forces to thump the capital's Persians. (Azeri-Persian relations—the two groups make up the lion's share of the Iranian elite—are intimate but not without tension.) Given how widespread the protests are now, if the demonstrators can gain numbers, it may be a challenge for the regime to deploy sufficient security forces made up of strangers to those being repressed. We know that in 2009 and 2010 Khamenei played musical chairs with a number of Guard commanders, likely because they displayed insufficient vigor in squashing dissent. The regime's enforcers may be more solid today. They may not be. Only time and clashes will tell.

But if the clerical dictatorship misplays its hand, that is, fails to find the right kind and quantity of intimidation, it could run into what Bashar al-Assad discovered to his regret: The lower classes are more stubborn than the college-educated middle and

upper classes. Khamenei was able to crush the 2009 Tehran rebellion with relatively few deaths (estimates vary between 150 to 700 killed). His forces did effectively use torture, including rape, which sent shock waves through elite circles. That could well work in the provinces; it also might backfire horribly. It's hard to see how the regime can plausibly label thousands of lower-class youth *mohareban*, enemies of God, as senior clerical prosecutors and Guard commanders have already threatened. Perhaps more than in 2009, the regime confronts an enormous existential crisis.

Khamenei appears to be judging the situation slowly, no doubt in considerable shock that he must, once again, make a regime-saving choice. He has certainly earned the right to think of himself as the most astute and clever dictator in contemporary Middle Eastern history. (Hafez al-Assad, who created the minority Alawite dictatorship in Syria, is his only real competition.) A charisma-free, religiously lightweight cleric has prospered in the Middle East's most charisma-worshipping, cleric-heavy society. One thing is crystal clear, however: His religious writ is finished. (It was on life-support after 2009.) So, too, Rouhani's presidency. The ideological constructs both mullahs have used to justify their rule are done. Neither Tehran nor the provinces see Khamenei as "the shadow of God on earth." After the trauma of 2009, Rouhani wanted to enlarge the tent for those willing to accept the regime in exchange for greater economic performance—in other words, an Iranian Islamist version of the Chinese model: prosperity for political quiescence.

If the protests continue or are violently crushed, Rouhani will have to choose Khamenei's side unmistakably, as he did in 1999, when university riots convulsed the capital, and again in 2009 with the Green Movement. When he does so, his marriage of convenience with what's left of the reformists of the 1990s and the Green Movement will dissolve. Rouhani only became president because he convinced Khamenei that he could heal the wounds of 2009 and make the

country richer. Whatever power and prestige Rouhani had among his own pragmatic revolutionary circle, whose members were all beholden to the late Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Khomeini's right-hand mullah, have probably been irreparably damaged.

Although Donald Trump's tweets on the upheaval have been good, we don't have any firm idea what he or Congress are going to do, if they are going to do anything at all, to support the protesters. This eruption of popular disgust ought to make it easier for the White House to walk away from the nuclear accord and slam the Revolutionary Guards with massive sanctions. But this administration and Congress don't seem willing to go there yet. The president, United Nations ambassador Nikki Haley, and CIA director Mike Pompeo—the

less-wobbly Iran hawks within the administration—might change that. Republicans may be, once the rhetoric is skimmed off, no different from guilt-ridden Democrats, who now turn away from President Obama's decision to ignore the Green Movement uprising: They are willing to support the protesters so long as they don't have to do anything serious, that is, anything that would jeopardize the JCPOA.

In the coming weeks, we should have a much better idea whether Trump will be towards Iran something more than a harshly tweeting version of Obama. Iranians, the good guys and the bad, will force his hand. Until then, it's at least a pleasure to see a people daily engage in such exuberant, politically incorrect behavior. "Regime change" and "democracy" are much easier to say in Persian than in English. ♦

## Why They Fight

It's not just the economy, stupid.

BY KELLY JANE TORRANCE

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action nuclear agreement the West made with Iran in 2015 looked like a godsend for the mullahs' regime. In exchange for suspending its nuclear weapons program for a decade, the ostracized Islamic Republic received \$1.7 billion in cash and the promise of billions more as companies in the United States and Europe rushed to make their own deals in the country with economic sanctions lifted. But the accord that former president Barack Obama and his secretary of state John Kerry spearheaded might end up having the opposite effect. What the mullahs did with the money highlighted to Iranians how little their government cares about them, helping spark protests whose violent repression has made headlines around the world.

*Kelly Jane Torrance is deputy managing editor of THE WEEKLY STANDARD.*

With demonstrations throughout the country every day for a week and showing no signs of stopping, despite a death toll of 45 and rising, the JCPOA might one day prove a contributing factor to the fall of the Islamic Republic—though that's hardly what its Western negotiators intended.

Obama, who has made a number of political pronouncements since leaving the White House a year ago, has said nothing about the unrest in Iran. It's a repeat of his performance as president in 2009, when the Green Movement sprung up to protest what appeared to be the fraudulent reelection of the president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The regime violently quashed the demonstrations, killing at least 110 people and jailing 10,000 in the course of nine months, but Obama remained silent, much to the disappointment of the protesters, who chanted a rhyme in Farsi, "Obama, Obama, are you with

them or with us?” His retirement has not gone unnoticed in Iran.

“There is also one big difference now compared with 2009—the Obama policy of appeasement of the Iranian regime has finished,” says Shabnam Madadzadeh, a 30-year-old human-rights activist who fled Iran just over a year ago, after spending five years in prison. “Obama always helped the regime when it was in trouble. Now the regime no longer has this asset, and this has its impact on the people in the street, to realize that the international community is on their side and is not siding with the regime.”

The unrest that’s become the biggest challenge to the ruling regime since 2009 began with a protest against corruption and inflation on December 28 in Mashhad, Iran’s second-largest city. It was triggered, observers say, by news that the government was unveiling a budget cutting spending on social services and increasing spending on the military, as well as a spike in the price of foodstuffs. In the week of December 22, the cost of eggs rose 9 percent from the previous week, making them 54 percent more expensive than they had been a year earlier, according to the Central Bank of Iran. The outrage soon spread to the rest of the country while taking on a broader anti-government tone that targeted Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Hassan Rouhani. Chants of “Bread, work, freedom” turned into “Young people are unemployed, and mullahs have all the positions” and “The nation is destitute while the leader is acting like God,” then “Reformers, hardliners, the game is now over.” And soon the polite “Khamenei, forgive us, but it is time for you to go” gave way to “Death to the dictator” and “Death to Rouhani.”

Yet “Scattered Protests Erupt in Iran Over Economic Woes” is how the *New York Times* described the situation, and many outlets followed suit. “The protests are driven by socioeconomic grievances, not political aspiration,” insisted German-based Iranian political analyst Adnan Tabatabai. Days after the protesters began referencing the regime’s adventurism abroad, with chants such as “Death to Hezbollah,”

“Leave Syria alone, think about us instead,” “Never mind Palestine, think about us,” and “Forget about Gaza and Lebanon; I’ll sacrifice my life for Iran,” some Western journalists and commentators still characterized the ferment as strictly economic in nature. “In Iran, tight budget sparks nationwide protests” was *PBS Newshour*’s headline on January 3. “The price of eggs in Iran went up 50%, and 21 people were killed in the protests that followed” was a *Business Insider* headline the day before.



*This video frame is said by regime critics to show demonstrators in the city of Shahin Shahr attacking the barracks of a militia that had opened fire on protesters, December 31.*

Higher prices might have served as a spark, but it wasn’t a sudden economic downturn that set a fire under the mullahs’ feet. Iran’s economy cratered after the 1979 revolution deposed the shah and created the theocracy that has ruled ever since. In the decade and a half before the revolution, Iran’s gross national product grew, on average, at an annual rate of 13.2 percent. In the decade after, it fell by an annual average of 1.7 percent. The economy only got back up to its pre-revolution level in 2007 and has gone up and down since then. Inflation was at the wild rate of 35 percent in 2013, but it was at 9.04 percent in 2016, the first time it had dropped to single digits in a quarter-century, and hasn’t increased sharply: It was 10.53 percent last year. Growth did slow in 2017, but that’s because the economy made extraordinary gains the year before, thanks to the sanctions relief the JCPOA provided—the IMF estimated Iran had a 12.5 percent

real GDP growth rate in 2016 and 3.5 percent in 2017. Unemployment, though, saw an uptick in 2016, and it remained about the same in 2017.

More telling is the fact that many of the slogans heard on the streets in 130 cities over the past week echoed concerns dissidents detailed last summer, long before Rouhani unveiled his latest budget and egg prices went through the roof. In Paris in July, at an annual gathering of members and supporters of the National Council of Resistance of Iran,

I interviewed three young activists who had been jailed and tortured in Iran by Rouhani’s regime and had all left the country within the last two years. The image of the “pallets of cash” the Obama administration sent to the mullahs was still in their minds. “They put the money—cash—in an airplane. They sent it to Iran,” Farzad Madadzadeh, Shabnam’s brother, said. “None of that money reached the Iranian people. It reached Assad, Hezbollah.”

Arash Mohammadi was jailed three times for his efforts to help Iran’s huge number of economically disadvantaged citizens. The regime considered such humanitarian work a seditious affront because it revealed—simply by its existence—that the mullahs were stealing from the people. “It’s 100 percent a danger as a threat to the regime because it’ll become clear that for 38, 39 years, this government has done nothing for the people,” Arash said.

The JCPOA made that reality

public. The activists confirm that everyday Iranians knew about the cash the Obama administration sent to their leaders—and soon understood they would never see a dime of it. They read reports of the American and European companies eager to make million-dollar deals—and realized they wouldn't see a dime of those either. (Iranians are likely to think of those deals when they hear European officials respond to the sight of riot police attacking peaceful protesters with requests that “all concerned” renounce violence.)

“Tell these so-called experts that they need to get a serious education about the anatomy of a revolution,” scoffs one Iranian-American after reading coverage claiming the latest demonstrations in her native land spring strictly from recent economic hardship. “Revolutions always erupt from the discontent of the masses over a period of time and are triggered by a single event. That single event can be a specific crackdown, it may be a price hike on the city buses, you get my point.” Now, it's “the massive corruption and theft of the nation's wealth by the ayatollahs and the increasing material support of the international terrorist organizations. People are fed up,” she says. “The trigger for this uprising is the mishandling of the \$100 billion that Obama has given the ayatollahs. The chatter on the street ever since has been that that money will never be used for the ills and needs of the society and country, but instead will be used for once again expanding terrorism around the world and for the ayatollahs' personal private accounts. Which has been the case exactly.” The woman, who left Iran at 16, and her mother live in Washington. They have no affiliation with any opposition group, but they have been glued to Internet footage of the protests, in which thousands have been arrested, for a week.

Shabnam, who lives in Europe, is also in touch with people back home, helping organize further demonstrations as a member of the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (also called

Mujahedin-e Khalq, or MEK). “It is true that the protests are based on the economic suffering of the people which has existed for many years under the mullahs' regime. But because constant hatred for the regime by the people always existed in Iran (due to the



*Police stand over the body of a protester, according to regime critics, in the city of Dorud, December 30.*

human rights violations and denial of basic freedoms), there was always an explosive atmosphere in Iran which was under the ashes. That's why the uprising quickly became political,” she says. “From my personal experience, I know that the people genuinely understand that the root of all the economic hardships that they have faced is the regime. The people have realized that they will not be able to live normal decent lives and the economic situation will not get better for as long as the mullahs are in power.”

Some people outside, even after watching a week of raucous protests in which demonstrators risk a death-penalty sentence for “insulting” Khamenei, still don't understand the connection between the economic and the political. The *Washington Post* reported that “U.S. officials were surprised by the outbreak of the protests and how they have spread.” The newspaper talked to one official who

believes “the unrest is different from the protests in 2009 because the latest events are occurring outside Tehran and are fueled by working-class grievances that are economic in nature, not political” and added “that the novelty of the protests is making it difficult for U.S. officials to predict where they will lead.”

The officials should talk to those who knew that the situation in the Islamic Republic was a powder keg ready to blow—the Iranian opposition and the people who took them seriously. “The anti-corruption demonstrations that expanded over the past year were a warning sign that Tehran ignored,” says Alireza Jafarzadeh, deputy director of the Washington office of the National Council of Resistance of Iran. “What you see now is the accumulation of over three decades of repression and corruption that has now erupted. Dictators always miscalculate, as did the shah.”

Still, “even we are surprised by the pace and scope of the uprising,” says Ali Safavi, also an official with the Washington office of NCRI, which acts as a parliament in exile. “The army of the unemployed, hungry, shantytown and grave dwellers, the futureless youths, and the impoverished, who have been stripped of all their rights and liberties, have now risen up to take back their nation from the corrupt and criminal mullahs.” He predicted, “The day of reckoning is fast approaching.”

Even officials from the Obama administration seem to suspect that could be true—they're already angling to take credit for any freedom the long-oppressed Iranian people might win for themselves in what could be a long and brutal fight. In a January 4 piece in the *Washington Post*, Y.J. Fischer, who was assistant coordinator for implementation of the Iran nuclear agreement in Obama's State Department, declared that “it's fair to say the protests help illustrate that the Obama administration negotiated a better nuclear deal than many of its critics admit. It shows that critics who said Iran would be empowered by the deal were wrong.” ♦

IMAGES: SALAMPIX / ABACA / SIPA / NEWSOOM



Demonstrators set fire to a seminary in the city of Qazvin, January 1.

# The Princes and the Mullahs

Why Iranians are in the streets—and Saudis aren't.

BY ELLIOTT ABRAMS

The past week has seen widespread anti-government demonstrations in Iran, and the regime of the ayatollahs has responded with violent repression—including deadly force. Meanwhile there have been no demonstrations in Saudi Arabia, which is just as far from democracy. Why not?

The reasons—and the differences between the two cases—are significant. First, it is no accident that Iran's regime is led by a man, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who is now 78, who replaced a man (Ayatollah Khomeini) who was 86 when he died. That used to be the Saudi model as well, as one brother replaced another on the throne and each was older than the previous.

*Elliott Abrams is a senior fellow for Middle Eastern studies at the Council on Foreign Relations.*

But power is now moving to a new generation in Saudi Arabia. The new crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, is 32, and many of his own key advisers are from his generation. It's obvious to Saudis that he wants significant social and economic progress and has begun to promote it. To Saudis, this means that their government is in new hands and is suddenly an engine of change—not its enemy, as in Iran.

Moreover, though Saudi kings claim a special role as “Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques,” the Saudi regime is civil not religious in nature. A bargain between the clergy and the al-Saud family has lasted for generations, but they remain separate. When, for example, the religious police became widely unpopular, the royal family reined them in and removed most of their powers. While the clergy remain extremely conservative and

presumably oppose the recent decisions to allow women to drive, open soccer stadiums to mixed crowds, and permit the opening of movie theaters, power does not lie in their hands. The government made these decisions and can enforce them.

This does not mean that Saudi Arabia is more advanced socially than Iran, which is not the case. But it does mean that Saudis appear to believe their government is pushing the nation forward and defying the clergy—while across the Gulf, Iranians know all power is ultimately in the hands of the clergy, who do and will resist change. The system of *velayat-e faqih* or “rule of the jurist” that Ayatollah Khomeini established in Iran after 1979 is a theocracy. Power lies in the hands of the clerics, not the government, and the ayatollah who is supreme leader always holds far more power than elected politicians (more on those “elections” in a moment). The supreme leader—and not Iran's president, Hassan Rouhani, who is more of a chief administrative officer—leads the Revolutionary Guards and the military as well as the clergy and has the final word on every major decision.

Nevertheless, it is true that political rights are severely restricted in both Iran and Saudi Arabia. All those reforms in Saudi Arabia are

exclusively social and economic, and there is no sign of the slightest political opening. Indeed the restrictions are in many ways greater in Saudi Arabia: There are no elections and no parliamentary forms at all, while in Iran the president and a parliament are elected. So again, why are the demonstrations in Iran rather than in Saudi Arabia?

Part of the answer is found in the expectations game: While Mohammed bin Salman (known as MbS) surprised Saudis by pushing unexpectedly for social and economic modernization, Rouhani promised both political and economic improvement and has not delivered on either. Popular patience with Rouhani has clearly run out. As Ray Takeyh of the Council on Foreign Relations put it, Rouhani “has become a victim of the rising expectations that he cynically stimulated.” Despite the continued and ubiquitous references in the Western press to Rouhani as a “moderate,” Iranians can see with their own eyes that he is not; he is a regime stalwart who will never bring real change (and lacks the power to do so even if he wanted to).

By contrast, it seems to many Saudis that the crown prince has figured out that change is the only thing that will save the House of Saud. The old model of elderly brothers ruling in succession, of an unproductive economy saved by revenues from \$120 per barrel oil, of the clerics preventing anything new that smacked of the 21st (or even the 20th) century, was becoming a formula for disaster. Time will run out some day for MbS if he cannot deliver on his promises. But young Saudis will give him the chance to try.

Beyond the issue of expectations there lies the critical question of legitimacy. The great sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset wrote in 1959, “Legitimacy involves the capacity of a political system to engender and maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate or proper ones for the society.”

This is precisely what led to the “Arab Spring” revolts, which were uprisings against fake republics in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Syria, where that belief had been eroded

and finally destroyed by corruption, repression, and poor governance. There were no revolts in the Arab monarchies (except Bahrain, where uniquely the royal family is Sunni and the population is majority Shia) in good part because those monarchies had not lost their legitimacy.

In our Western view democratic legitimacy is the best and strongest form, but monarchic legitimacy exists in several Arab nations, especially in the Gulf. Some royal families have been in place for centuries; some claim descent from the prophet. It is hard to

**The Arab fake republics had none of the legitimacy of their monarchical neighbors, and it was quite obvious to citizens of those countries that they were ruled by brute force, that their rulers were thieves, and that things would never get better.**

measure the depth and power of this monarchic legitimacy and no doubt it varies from country to country and royal family to royal family, but it would be folly to deny its power. Performance legitimacy, the credit a government can earn by appearing to its own people as more effective and efficient than any likely replacement, can also be a strong pillar of public support or at least broad tolerance. This is the kind of legitimacy that Lee Kuan Yew, no democrat, gained as prime minister of Singapore.

The Arab fake republics had none of this, and it was quite obvious to citizens of those countries that they were ruled by brute force, that their rulers were thieves, and that things would never get better. Reform was impossible because it would threaten the power of the rulers. Those fake republics all had regular but stolen elections, powerless parliaments, and judicial systems that were absolutely without independence—in other words, all the trappings of Western

democracy without any of its substance. The illegitimacy of those Arab “republics” was the Achilles heel of their rulers and their regimes.

And that is precisely the situation in Iran today. It is a fake republic kept in place only by brutal repression. The lessons of the last few decades suggest that stolen elections—such as in Iran in 2009—are more likely to produce unrest than the absence of elections. The phoniness and hypocrisy of fake elections and of Western-style institutions that are actually empty insult and inflame many citizens, especially when combined with massive corruption, repression, and denial of political rights. Whatever legitimacy the Islamic Republic ever had has in the eyes of millions of Iranians been lost.

The Saudis are working hard now to retain their own through reform. But the Saudi gamble is analogous to that of Xi Jinping: Produce enough economic progress and people will forgo political rights. Xi has tightened his own control and that of the Communist party; MbS has centralized power in his own hands. And in both cases, the ideology of the ruling group does not rest on Western ideas about democracy, human rights, and self-government. It rests on Marxism-Leninism in the Chinese case and royal legitimacy in the Saudi—but both are fundamentally fragile if they cannot be reinforced by the tangible gains that performance legitimacy requires.

**C**an it work? For how long? In 2009 the China scholar Andrew Nathan described the challenge for Beijing:

Like all contemporary nondemocratic systems, the Chinese system suffers from a birth defect that it cannot cure: the fact that an alternative form of government is by common consent more legitimate. Even though the regime claims to be a Chinese form of democracy on the grounds that it serves the people and rules in their interest, and even though a majority of Chinese citizens today accept that claim, the regime admits, and everyone knows, that its authority has never been subject to popular review and is never intended to be. In that sense, the regime is branded as an expedient,

something temporary and transitional needed to meet the exigencies of the time. Democratic regimes, by contrast, often elicit disappointment and frustration, but they confront no rival form that outshines them in prestige. Authoritarian regimes in this sense are not forever. For all their diversity and longevity, they live under the shadow of the future, vulnerable to existential challenges that mature democratic systems do not face.

This remains accurate as to China, and the determination of the regime to resist free elections of any type and any freedom of speech or press, and brutally to crush those individuals bravely struggling to assert human rights, shows that Xi recognizes the dangers any political opening would bring. The same can be said of Iran. The regime has an ideology, *velayat-e faqih*, but it has never been put to a popular referendum and is never intended to be, because the majority of Iranians would never accept it. The regime is not legitimate in the eyes of the people, who know exactly what they want: a Western-style democracy. This is what powered their desire to overthrow the shah in 1979 and powers the protests today, and the regime will always live under what Nathan called “the shadow of the future.” Today’s protests may be crushed just as were those of 2009 by clerics who will kill to stay in power. But protests will return again and again as they have since 1979. Iranians want freedom.

The Saudi case is more complex because there has never been a revolution and the system appears to retain its legitimacy. If MbS can produce economic and social change, demands for political freedom will be muted. Performance legitimacy combined with (and indeed, strengthening) monarchic legitimacy may allow the Saud family decades more of absolute power. But Saudi rulers will need some form of partnership with the ruled. That partnership may be found for now in combined efforts to modernize the economy and the society. In several monarchies of the region, such as Morocco, Jordan, and Kuwait, royal rule is combined with parliaments and largely

free elections; these are not absolute monarchies. Perhaps someday the Saudis will have to move in that direction. As far as one can make out today, such political demands as there are in Saudi Arabia relate more to human rights—freedom of expression, rule of law, religious freedom for non-Sunni worshipers such as Shia Muslims and Christians—than to full democracy. Ultimately, however, in a modern society with a growing number of educated citizens, the demand for a real role in governing the country is inevitable.

For now, Iranians are disgusted with the refusal of their rulers to

allow change and reform despite their repeated promises, while Saudis are surprised and apparently pleased by their rulers’ insistence on change. Saudis will give MbS time, but their heightened expectations mean that if he fails and the kingdom starts returning to the past, there will be trouble in the streets.

There is trouble in the streets of Iran today because Iranians know exactly what they want, which is freedom, and they have known since 1979 that their rulers will not give it to them. That’s why there has been wave after wave of protests and why they will never end until Iran is free. ♦

## Unidentified Fiscal Objects

The rest of the *New York Times* UFO story.

BY JAY COST

Last month, the *New York Times* reported what appeared to be a bombshell: The United States Department of Defense had squirreled away \$22 million to fund the Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program. This “shadowy” program—run from “the Pentagon’s C Ring, deep within the building’s maze,” as the *Times* tantalizingly put it—“collected video and audio recordings of reported U.F.O. incidents,” some of which the *Times* offered on its website.

It was quite a scoop, or so it appeared at first blush. But Jeff Wise of *New York* magazine took a closer look and found there was less to it than met the eye. The *Times* piece, Wise noted, made “portentous assertions out of context” that were “decidedly short on specifics” and made use of videos that have been “kicking around the internet for some time.”

Jay Cost is a contributing editor to THE WEEKLY STANDARD.

Importantly, the *Times* downplayed the fact that the initial request for the appropriation was made by former senator Harry Reid and that most of the money went to Robert Bigelow, the “billionaire entrepreneur and longtime friend” of the former senator. The *Times* failed to mention that Bigelow had also been a longtime patron of Reid’s political activities, giving thousands of dollars over the years to Reid’s political campaigns and the Searchlight Leadership Fund, the former majority leader’s PAC.

So it seems what the *Times* actually discovered was another example of how the government wastes money at the behest of special interests. Bigelow’s elevated status in Nevada business and political circles got him the ear of Reid, who was able to secure financing for a pet project, which was discontinued after having revealed little that was not already known.

That was the real story. Why didn’t the *Times* frame it that way?

Conservatives have long understood that the mainstream media lean left. Journalists vote disproportionately for Democrats, and there is a revolving door between Democratic politics and journalism. News outlets often frame stories to favor Democrats—a favorite among conservatives is noting how often mainstream media outlets talk about “Republicans pouncing” on stories that embarrass liberals, rather than “Democrats reeling.” And editors tend to downplay stories that are uncomfortable for Democrats—remember, for instance, the relative silence regarding the atrocities of abortionist Kermit Gosnell.

The predominant political bias of the mainstream media is for a standpat, establishment type of liberalism—rather than radical or reformist. This view generally promotes an expansive role for government, without major changes to the way politics operates inside the Beltway. Accordingly, the press is prone to downplay the outsized influence of special interests when these are aligned with liberal causes and their champions.

Thus, implicit within the *Times*'s article was the notion that this was a good and defensible use of taxpayer funds, rather than another example of how the wealthy friends of politicians can direct money their way.

That's almost always the way it goes with media coverage of government spending, no matter how indefensible it might seem. Consider how the media dealt with GOP efforts in 2015 to do away with the Export-Import Bank. This is a government institution that adds negligible economic value and is of primary utility to Boeing, which spends lavishly on the political process. Yet how did the press frame it? The *New York Times* called it the “81-year-old agency that helps finance many American exports.” *USA Today*'s description was similar: an “80-year-old federal agency that makes it easier for foreign companies to borrow money to buy U.S.-made products.” In other words, it is a useful, longstanding program—rather than a longtime waste of government resources.

Or consider the way the media

characterized Florida senator Marco Rubio's 2015 attempts to stop the Obama administration from funneling unappropriated money to the health insurance industry to support Obamacare. The real story was that the problematic design of Obamacare, combined with the unilateral actions

**Journalists vote disproportionately for Democrats, and there is a revolving door between Democratic politics and journalism. News outlets often frame stories to favor Democrats. So, implicit within the *Times*'s article was the idea that \$22 million for UFO-hunting was a good and defensible use of taxpayer funds, rather than another example of how the wealthy friends of politicians can direct money their way.**



Robert Bigelow, left, and patron Harry Reid

of the administration to grant various exemptions, had made it difficult for insurance companies to build a profitable foundation on the government-created exchange marketplace. So the Obama administration wanted to direct unappropriated funds to the insurers, who, it must be remembered, had been cast by liberals as the chief villains during the health care debate of 2009.

Did the media highlight the design flaws of the marketplace, the shortsighted actions of the Obamacare administration, its intention to spend

money without congressional sanction, or the profit-driven motives of the insurers? Not especially. One typical 2015 headline from the *New York Times* warned that “Marco Rubio Quietly Undermines Affordable Care Act.” The story characterized Rubio's effort as an “attack.” He had “slipped” a “little-noticed” provision “into a giant spending law” that “sent tremors through health insurance markets” and “rattled confidence.” The implication was undeniable: What Rubio was doing was bad.

Contrast these stories with the media's typical approach to super-PACs, which have of late come to spend vast sums during campaign season. This is cast as “dark money,” which cannot be traced with precision to its origins, but often emanates from a handful of wealthy donors. The clear suggestion in such stories is that these funds are corrupting the electoral process.

The role of super-PACs is no doubt troubling, but when it comes to scrutinizing the *governing* process, especially the vast concatenation of interest groups and politicians looking to expand the federal government's footprint, the media are decidedly blasé. Those special interests are “friendlies.” If they get a little extra for their support of the liberal agenda in growing the size and scope of government, that is just how the system works.

The mainstream media, then, are not simply liberal in their orientation. They specifically bow to the tenets of interest-group liberalism. The press not only supports an activist federal government, it is content with the government's role being mediated by interest groups that have bought their way into the political process, become entrenched, and, in turn, make a profit from their efforts.

Given that interest-group liberalism is the dominant governing ethos in Washington, the press is, from a certain perspective, fairly conservative. How else could the *Times* shrug its shoulders at a waste of \$22 million chasing after UFOs? That is just the price of (liberal) politics. ♦

LEFT, VIA TWITTER; RIGHT, SENATE DEMOCRATS

# Emmanuel for All Seasons

*President Macron is more digital than democratic*

BY DOMINIC GREEN

Emmanuel Macron won the French presidency last spring with promises to break the old political order and transform the French economy. These promises were not dissimilar from those of candidates of the extremes, Jean-Luc Mélenchon on the left and Marine Le Pen on the right. Meanwhile, the two big parties in the middle, the center-left Socialist party and center-right *Républicains*, both promised to produce the omelet of economic reform without cracking the egg of the political order. Both disqualified themselves, the Socialists by association with the failed outgoing president François Hollande and *Les Républicains* by association with corruption allegations against their candidate, François Fillon.

The failure of the big parties seemed to confirm the analysis of Macron, Le Pen, and Mélenchon: A self-serving elite had lowered France's productivity, hampered its ingenuity, and placed the nation on short rations of the *gloire* to which it is accustomed. Voters repudiated the old parties, producing a runoff between Macron and Le Pen, two populists who insisted that they were "neither of the left nor the right." Macron easily won the center ground and took two-thirds of the vote.

Macron, like Barack Obama in 2008, took his election as a license to reshape the system for a generation. And voters certainly encouraged maximal ambition: In June's elections to the National Assembly, they delivered a whopping majority to his new party *En Marche!* and its allies. The following month, he summoned legislators to the Palace

*Paris*



*Macron at the launch of Station F, June 29*

of Versailles and delivered an unprecedented 90-minute speech in the style of a State of the Union address. Attacking the *immobilisme* of his predecessors, who include his erstwhile mentor Hollande, Macron outlined proposals to reform France's notoriously sclerotic labor market and education system; to reduce the "spread of bureaucracy" in the European Union and the "growing skepticism that comes from that"; and to end the state of emergency, declared after the November 2015 Islamist attacks in Paris. To accelerate the legislative process, the number of members in the

National Assembly would be reduced by one-third. French citizens would get an unspecified "dose" of proportional representation and more opportunity to push items onto the parliamentary agenda by petition.

"It is," Napoleon said, "not in the French character to insult kings." So when Mélenchon accused Macron of acting like "a pharaoh" for staging his speech at Versailles, the insult was uncharacteristic. Really, Macron was acting in the tradition of Napoleon Bonaparte and Charles de Gaulle, a captain who became an emperor and a colonel who became

a president. The constitution of the Fifth Republic gives the president quasi-imperial powers. The French do not object in principle to their use. In this, Macron's moves were not a break from tradition but in keeping with it.

"Our history has made us children of the state, and not of law, as in the United States, or of maritime trade, as in England," Macron theorized in his pre-election autobiography, which bore the Gallic title *Révolution*. "It is both a splendid heritage and a dangerous one."

In the last six months, Macron has demonstrated the splendid and dangerous aspects of his executive powers. He has begun his promised combat with regulation, taxation, and vested interest. He has also demonstrated a peevish sensitivity to criticism and a highhanded coldness as

*Dominic Green, a fellow of the Royal Historical Society, is a frequent contributor to THE WEEKLY STANDARD.*

CHRISTOPHE MORIN / IPS / GETTY



The front desk of Station F's Share Zone, which, despite the large message, is decidedly unwelcoming

unsuited to populism as it is damaging to his goal of reunifying a divided and demoralized electorate.

In October, Macron cut France's wealth tax, first imposed by the Socialist president François Mitterrand in 1982, and imposed a flat-rate 30 percent tax on capital gains. To balance deregulatory and pro-business policies at home, Macron has demanded protectionist concessions from the European Union. In early November, a poll pronounced that Macron was "the president of the rich."

This populist blend of pro-business deregulation at home and pro-labor protectionism abroad is not the only resemblance between Macron and Donald Trump. Both presidents emerged from the top of society but campaigned against it. Macron is an *énarque*, a graduate of the *École nationale d'administration*, France's high-prestige school of government. Before serving as Hollande's minister for economy, industry, and digital affairs, he worked as an investment banker for the Rothschild Group, no less.

While Trump antagonizes the affluent left with ostentatious philistinism, Macron shows a market-oriented contempt for the weak. He speaks of *les gens qui réussissent* and *les gens qui ne sont rien*, "those who succeed" and "those who are nothing." He dismisses dissent as "cynicism" and objectors as *les fainéants*, "the lazy." France, he says, must choose between *le monde ancien* and *le monde nouveau*, the old order and the new.

In Paris, people kept giving me the same advice: If you want to understand Macron's plans for France, go to Station F in the quartier de la Gare. There you will begin to grasp the new president's dreams of a digital, entrepreneurial, innovative France.

Station F is southeast of central Paris, across the Seine and behind the Gare d'Austerlitz in the 13th arrondissement. The quartier de la Gare, as the name admits, is one of those 19th-century neighborhoods made and ruined by the railway. The trains pulling in and out of the Gare d'Austerlitz circulate grit into the surrounding streets. The tracks to and from the station run parallel to the river and cut off most of the area from the Seine and central Paris. Recently, the waterfront sliver to the north of the tracks has been redeveloped for prestige buildings—a hotel, the Bibliothèque Nationale, university buildings. Rather than elevate the neighborhood, these developments have only reinforced its geographical isolation.

Those developments are also a reminder that vast economic ambition has been a hallmark of many of Macron's predecessors. In another age—the 1970s and '80s, to be precise—the French government embraced the idea of state-driven innovation. It completed the world's largest purpose-built business district—the skyscraper-punctuated neighborhood known as La Défense, just west of central Paris. It launched a pioneering computer network. While

Americans still hefted printed telephone directories, the French had the Minitel, a computerized listing with a video terminal small enough to nestle on the phone table. Since then, France, like the rest of Europe, has fallen behind in tech innovation.

Can Station F arrest the decline? Descending from the elevated Métro line at Quai de la Gare station, you see Turkish kebab shops, a Communist party shopfront, and government offices, but no signs for Station F. This is not happenstance. The Press page on Station F's website has no telephone numbers or email addresses, only enthusiastic press releases. The Contact page has a picture of a cat and the words "Send us some love," but it is not cuddly. It is a Contact page without contact details.

Station F was built in the 1920s as a freight-handling outpost of the Gare d'Austerlitz. Now, a telecom billionaire named Xavier Niel has turned it into "the world's biggest startup campus," a 366,000-square-foot space housing "a thousand startups," about 2,600 employees, and "even a post office, to see what came before emails."

Station F's publicists describe it as "the only startup campus gathering a whole entrepreneurial ecosystem under one roof." This may be true, if only because the benign climate obviates the need to roof over Silicon Valley. California is never far from Station F's hive mind. The whole place is an artificial simulation of the California state of mind, an attempt to hothouse the French equivalents of the American tech giants. Station F is one of three such sites in the city, all apparently named for nightclubs from the 1990s. (The related sites, Cargo and Spark, are sponsored by the city of Paris and Microsoft, respectively.)

The front half of Station F is called the Share Zone. The rear, separated by two glass walls, is the Create Zone. The roof is a single-span concrete arc of surprising delicacy, and the skylights that run along the center of the roof suffuse the space with cool light. You can see down the entire length of the space, a deep vista of beanbag chairs and potted plants. Double stacks of white-painted shipping containers run down both sides. Each container has had its end replaced by a glass wall, allowing people on the floor to watch the Sharing of ideas between the conceptual upper class of Creators and carefully vetted visitors from the Outside. I look up and see a large group squeezed into one such container; it is as though IKEA has gone into the people-smuggling business.

A black-suited young man sits at the front desk as the Sharers swipe in. A large sign reads *Bonjour*.

"I've come to see Station F," I say.

"No."

"Can I speak to a press officer?"

"No. There is no press officer here."

"Can I speak with one on the phone?"

"No. She has no telephone. We use only text and Internet. You have to be invited. You put your name into our computer, called Hal, and then maybe we let you in."

I remember Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* and HAL, the computer that takes over from the humans.

"Have you seen *A Space Odyssey*?"

"No."

Back outside, the supplicants stand around smoking. Some are keying themselves up for meetings, others trying to work out how it went. They could be auditioning for a tech musical called *Zuckerberg!* None of them uses the café by the door. This may be because, like the Press and Contact pages of Station F's website, the café's design superficially

appears to welcome, but functions as a repellent. It offers only soup, tea, and coffee. By French standards it is not a café at all, more like catering for rescue workers after a natural disaster.

The café also looks like IKEA, down to the soiled cushions and beanbags. Another glass wall shows the neighboring compartment, in which a visibly awkward group of middle-aged white men in business suits are being counseled by a youth in a denim shirt before a whiteboard reading *Savoir-Faire*.

"This is only the outer circle," a petitioner tells me. A tech consultant from Paris, he lives and works in London. "I like the layout," he says, "very Californian." He nods towards the Create zone, where some old colleagues are working. "The heavy work goes on back there. You can't get in, and you can't speak to anyone."

"Philippe" has also come from London. He too is encouraged by what he sees.

"There's been a shift in recent years from a Paris-centric society," he says. "Macron's election was the necessary spark, to light a wave of French business and innovation that had already been building up. As a country, we're able to merge high levels of technical and academic training with a philosophical core of values. We value positive societal impact alongside profit."

Macron hopes that when the French tech economy closes the innovation gap, it will also close the social gap. Station F's recruiters solicit Founders, companies who will rent spaces and fund startups. Station F also seeks individual "Fighters," the "killer entrepreneurs who simply have not had the same opportunities as the rest." These "might

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**Station F is an artificial simulation of the California state of mind, an attempt to hothouse the French equivalents of the American tech giants.**

be from an underprivileged background, an immigrant or a refugee.” The people I met at Station F are not Fighters, but seasoned and multilingual entrepreneurs—the kind of people François Hollande chased to London by raising taxes on “faceless finance,” people Macron now wants to woo back.

“There’s currently a tax war going on around the world, Trump’s tax bill being an excellent example,” Philippe says. “So France is undertaking the required measures to be competitive.” France, he points out, is already benefiting from Brexit-related uncertainty. “The current environment of low interest rates is promoting increased investment. In recent quarters, France has overtaken the U.K. for the first time in venture funding. And the state is deploying numerous initiatives, like the French Tech label that gives startups increased visibility and access to resources.”

Around the corner, crowds of Sharers take lunch in what must be the Californian way, grilled cheese and soup from food trucks. On a bench, a team of young consultants gamely nibble sandwiches filled with Tex-Mex sludge. They are advising “established companies” in the insurance business how to foster white-collar “diversity” by working with startups.

I enter the lobby that connects the Share Zone to the Create Zone, but a security guard runs up, arms waving. We are standing between two glass walls, but there is, it seems, nothing to see—other than the interface of government money and digital dreams.

The French buzzword du jour is *désintermédiation*. The term comes from banking and describes the elimination of intermediaries between producers and consumers. Macron has applied this concept to the press. Previous presidents tolerated constant surveillance by a free-for-all pack of reporters; previous press secretaries sought to manipulate it. Macron, however, uses a “pool” of one news reporter, one cameraman, and one radio reporter. Opportunities for questions are reduced. So are opportunities for catching the president in the kind of “hot mike” errors and casual admissions that might dent his media image.



Xavier Niel, billionaire developer of Station F, stands with students who are getting their California on with matching T-shirts; below, Station F’s post-industrial exterior; and at bottom, Creators at work in one of their cozy converted shipping containers.



TOP: CHRISTOPHE MORIN / BLOOMBERG / GETTY; CENTER AND BOTTOM: TWS / DOMINIC GREEN

“The disintermediation strategy is a way for Macron to involve himself directly with the French without passing through the prism of media,” says Jean-Daniel Lévy of the polling company Harris Interactive. “The idea behind this is that the media could deform some of his message and that therefore it would be better to interact directly with the people.”

In France as in every other Western democracy, the established parties have failed to protect middle-class workers. The media, while priding itself as a watchdog, is seen as a lapdog.

“What’s striking today,” Lévy observes, “is the absence of confidence among the French with regard to the media. There is strong criticism of journalism. There’s also an idea that it could be done differently.” Macron did not pioneer *désintermédiation* in French politics. “Look at what happened before Macron,” Lévy says. “Mélenchon, the candidate of the left, created *Le Média*, a YouTube channel. There’s now a global sense of creating your own content as you form your political frame of reference.”

Access to the Create Zone of Station F, as I discovered, is strictly controlled. Tech people may find virtue in the “disruption” of other people’s businesses, but they seem very keen not to be disrupted themselves. But this is still France. Beyond the food trucks, dozens of Creators flagrantly disregard their health and the security of all our futures. It is illegal to smoke indoors, so they take their cigarette breaks outside, secure zone or not.

“Do you want to know about Xavier Niel?” a young Creator asks, referring to Station F’s creator. He looks around nervously, as if he has just given away the identity of a Bond villain. His face is gray from too much coffee, tobacco, and refined pastry.

“Not really.” I explain that I have come from the land of giants, of Zuckerberg and Jobs. We have many Xavier Niels, and the streets of our coastal cities are jammed with food trucks, their flanks streaked in Sriracha sauce. I want to know how Station F works.

“Security is really tight in there,” he says. He has been working here for a month, and the excitement is wearing off. “We can’t even have visitors in the Create Zone,” he complains. “We have to register them, then meet them in the Share Zone.” He shakes his head and lights another cigarette. “Of course the press officer is here. They just don’t want anyone asking questions.”

Any of the young petitioners by the door to the Share Zone could walk down the side of Station F and pitch their ideas to the Creators during their cigarette breaks. None of them does. Instead, they wait, orderly and compliant, in the rain. Is this the old Gallic rigidity or a new variation, the docility of a generation trained in online protocols, passwords, and gaming environments, where correct procedures

are rewarded with entry to the next level, and unsatisfactory responses lead not to disruption, but exclusion?

The third phase of Station F is still under construction. Behind the Create Zone, where Facebook has its Startup Garage Paris (“to empower data-driven startups in France”) and ex-president Hollande fiddles with the WiFi codes for his new foundation, there will be apartments, or “dorms,” for the winners, with a sports complex and a restaurant in two ironically converted railway carriages. Once this phase is operational, there will be no need ever to leave the campus.

In La Nouvelle Gare, a café by the gate to Station F, a few old people are eating lunch at the interior tables. On the terrace, similarly underemployed teenagers are drinking sodas and smoking. A poster by the bar depicts Vermeer’s *Astronomer*, stroking the planet as if anticipating globalization.

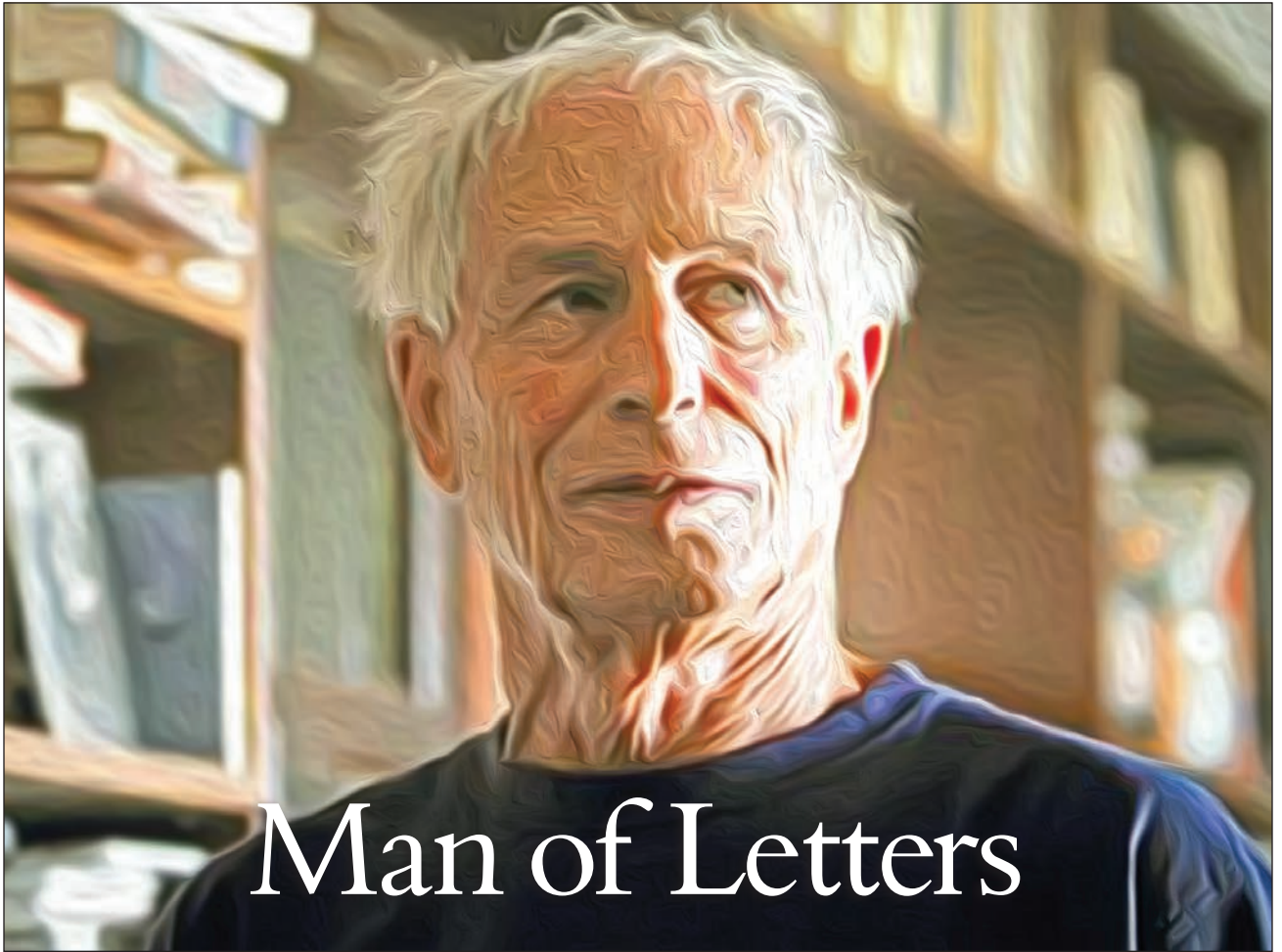
“*C’est bon*,” says the *patron* when I ask about Station F. “Good for the *quartier*, good for the 13th, good for *la France*.” Good for business, too. As we talk, a couple of Station F habitués come in for lunch. But will they still come in once Station F’s on-site restaurant is open? How far will France’s digital wealth trickle down?

Similar claims for revitalization and gentrification were once made for the Quatre Temps development at La Défense in the 1980s and for its City of London rival, Canary Wharf. But the wealth generated by those developments has not trickled down to the neighbors. The low-income housing of the Paris suburbs persists in a parallel world to La Défense. Tower Hamlets, in the shadow of the City of London, is still one of the poorest boroughs in Western Europe. In San Francisco, tech money has slowly expelled the poorer residents from the city.

Macron wants to change the French mentality, to cure the French of what he calls “*les passions tristes*,” negative thoughts. But Station F seems instead to be incubating the worst traits of Silicon Valley, paranoia and passive aggression. Once, France’s “people who are nothing” were limited by the glass ceiling. Now, they will be excluded by the glass wall, more translucent than transparent.

I went to Paris wondering if Macron was the Tony Blair to Nicolas Sarkozy’s Thatcher, a faux-radical who inherits and extends the other party’s market reforms. I returned with the impression that Macron is an Emmanuel for all seasons, a post-ideological insider who wants to replace one unaccountable elite with another and strengthen the state with the resources of digital technocracy.

“Is it good that political authorities like Macron communicate directly with the French?” Jean-Daniel Lévy asks. “Or is it a shame that the media can no longer play their part, which is to transmit or to give a perspective on results and debates?” ♦



# Man of Letters

*A visit with Hillel Halkin—scholar, novelist, Zionist.* BY ADAM RUBENSTEIN

**W**hat is a snoop? In a review of one of his books, the Israeli writer, translator, and critic Hillel Halkin was called “one of the great snoops of the age.” In English, the word carries a negative connotation: A snoop is one who sticks his nose in others’ affairs, who pries. In Hebrew, the noun can be rendered as *balash*, a word that suggests a gumshoe, a detective. That somewhat more dignified Hebrew concept applies to Halkin. He has the snoop’s attitude and gimlet eye, a critic sizing up everything and everyone before him, including his readers.

*Adam Rubenstein is assistant books & arts editor at THE WEEKLY STANDARD.*

Halkin and I recently met at a café, upscale by Israeli standards, in Zichron Ya’akov, the village in which he has lived 45 of his 47 Israeli years. He moved to Israel from the United States in 1970, when he was 31, with his wife Marcia. Dressed casually in a T-shirt, jeans, sandals, and a blue hat to shade from the Levantine sun, Halkin sat across from me at a table on the stone patio. When he ordered a glass of Merlot, the waitress asked (in Hebrew) whether he wanted the expensive one or the cheap one. Halkin inquired as to the difference in price, but the waitress didn’t know and went to check. She came back, informed us of the costs, which differed by around 20 shekels, but said she only had the more expensive one. “Fine,” said Halkin, “but pour a little extra in my glass.” He

explained that in Israel, he “feels free to connect to people in that way,” but “in any other country I wouldn’t feel comfortable doing that. The flip side is the Israeli rudeness everyone is always complaining about, but rudeness and closeness are two different forms of the same thing.” When his wine came, he commented to me that she added nothing extra to his glass.

He shared his fish and chips with the stray cats of Zichron, the feral vestige of Israel’s overcorrection of a rat infestation decades ago. One jumped onto our table. I tried to shoo it away but it didn’t budge. “Well, if you want it off the table,” Halkin said, “you’ll have to push it harder than that!” He stood up and whacked the thing. It gracefully landed beside us and, without skipping a beat, leapt onto a nearby

WEEKLY STANDARD PHOTO ILLUSTRATION; PHOTO COURTESY OF RESTLESS BOOKS

table from which some half-eaten shakshuka hadn't yet been cleared.

The day we met, Halkin was in the midst of a move—leaving his house of 45 years for another on a smaller plot of land in Zichron. The place is becoming a commuter town, Halkin said, a village in which people who work in Tel Aviv or Haifa can sink roots somewhere a reasonable distance outside of the urban districts. His former home will be demolished to make room for row cottages. So it's something of a wistful moment, suitable for reflecting on Halkin's memories of what originally brought him to his adopted town and country.

Halkin was born in New York City in 1939, the son of a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary—"a man," Halkin says, "of extraordinary Jewish erudition," who spoke Yiddish and "better than perfect" Hebrew. Halkin was schooled until ninth grade at Ramaz, a modern-Orthodox Jewish day school in Manhattan, and spent his summers at a Hebrew-speaking camp. After high school at Bronx Science he went to Columbia, studying English literature.

During his boyhood and into his college years, Halkin was an avid reader of novels, which he now considers "the highest form of literature." He still holds dear James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*, for in the character of Stephen Dedalus, Halkin sees much of himself—"if you allow for the fact that I grew up as a Jew and Stephen grew up as a Catholic." But in college his interests grew to include philosophy. If Columbia's Butler Library is missing its reserve copy of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, it might be because Halkin absconded with the volume one night a half-century ago. He slipped it under his arm, covering it in the shade of his jacket, and walked out with it, needing to finish it despite the library's closing. The ends justified his snoopery means.

He studied for a year at Cambridge University on a fellowship, then returned to New York in 1961 and was hired for his first salaried job, an editorial position at Schocken, a Jewish publishing house. Halkin worked

alongside three others—a bookkeeper, a secretary, and the publisher Herzl Rome—in an apartment on Park Avenue. He edited manuscripts, drafted blurbs, and brought books to the post office for mailing. After getting a master's degree in English literature from Columbia and spending time in Israel, California, and Alabama (where he taught at the Tuskegee Institute), he returned again to New York, first taking a magazine job, then writing and translating for the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* as an assistant divisional editor of its first volume. By the late 1960s, he was a literary man in the making.

As we sat for a few hours in the café, several patrons approached our table and introduced themselves to Halkin. He accepted their praise—"You can stick that into your interview," he told me—but maintained he didn't quite understand it. "This happens to me more often than you'd expect. I'm not sure why."

But the reasons that Halkin is well known are perfectly apparent to readers interested in Jewish life, literature, and ideas. He has been a frequent contributor to *Commentary* and the web magazine *Mosaic*, bringing his classical learning and astonishing intellect to bear on questions of the day. He has translated into English dozens of Hebrew and Yiddish texts, including S. Y. Agnon's novels *To This Day* and *A Simple Story*, A. B. Yehoshua's *A Woman in Jerusalem*, and Sholem Aleichem's *Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories*. And he has written eight nonfiction books, including *Across the Sabbath River* (2002), in which he chronicled his research and travels in Asia looking for the scattered descendants of a lost tribe of Israel, the Bnei Menashe. He has written biographies of the medieval philosopher-poet Yehuda Halevi (for which he earned a National Jewish Book Award in 2010) and the Zionist leader Ze'ev Jabotinsky.

Not all of Halkin's work is as well known, and a large portion of it is hiding in plain sight: Under a pseudonym—I'll refrain from mentioning it here—Halkin has written some 1,200

columns about language and etymology, first for the *Forward* and now for *Mosaic*. Here we see something more of the snoop about Halkin's work, and perhaps some of the tension between the way of the snoop (a good snoop goes unseen) and the way of the writer (who usually seeks to persuade, tell stories, or receive praise).

The fact that Halkin is greeted in public and thanked by strangers surely has something to do with his first book. A few years after he and Marcia moved to Israel he began work on *Letters to an American Jewish Friend: A Zionist's Polemic* (1977). The book is written as if it were Halkin's side of an exchange of letters over several months with a fictitious American friend, a composite of some of Halkin's real friends. It is a deep yet lively exploration of Jewish continuity. The classical Zionists, Halkin writes, believed that Jews were "hopelessly trapped between the Scylla of assimilation and the Charybdis of anti-Semitism." The existence of Israel offers another option. He draws on history, philosophy, sociopolitical commentary, and descriptions of his young family's life in the young country to make the case that for a Jew, Israel is the most logical place to live. "I have tried to reason with you," Halkin writes his pen pal in the book's concluding letter, "to implant in you no more than a feeling of unease for being where you are, or if you prefer, since I don't mind speaking bluntly, of guilt." And even if the reader does not leave America to make *aliyah*—that is, does not move to Israel—"I should hope that these letters will have helped you to think more clearly about the alternatives before us."

The best dialogic literature forces a confrontation with one's basic assumptions; it riles the reader. But what makes Halkin's case so compelling is that he and his wife had recently made the move to Israel—that is, he is a case study in the security of his own argument. *Letters* combines the thumotic and the erotic—the spirited, preservative case for *aliyah* with a yearning for completeness.

Halkin wrote a new introductory essay for the book's 2013 reprinting, reminding readers that he doesn't know

if there will be an Israel one hundred years from now. I don't know if there will be one in fifty years. It depends on many things. One of them is whether you who read this book understand that the responsibility is yours, too. I wrote it to persuade you. . . . I hope you're still there.

In a symposium of responses to Halkin's essay, commissioned by the editors of *Mosaic*, you can see how the debate *Letters* engendered in the '70s remains alive today. "What bothers me," wrote SUNY Binghamton professor Allan Arkush, is Halkin's "reluctance to acknowledge that we [the Jewish diaspora] might serve some useful purpose." The scholar Ruth Wisse—a friend of Halkin and someone who moved to Israel around the same time he did but eventually returned to America—praises *Letters* but joins Arkush in believing "Israel may need more reinforcement from us [non-Israeli Jews] than [Halkin had] anticipated." (When I asked Halkin about this notion of Western reinforcement, he demurred, saying that while it was certainly true at Israel's inception, it is less true today.)

Someone who has known Halkin for decades but who asked for professional reasons not to be identified here told me, "If I were the state of Israel I would have given him the Israel Prize long ago." Halkin has, in his writings, "done as much for the country, for Zionism, for the Jewish people, for the morale of the Jewish people, as almost anyone I can think of."

While official recognition from the state of Israel would surely be gratifying, Halkin seems moved more by the personal kind of recognition he regularly receives. He told me that in the years after *Letters* was published, hundreds of readers sent him notes thanking him and citing the book as a factor in their making *aliyah*. For a writer, a person whose work is so often solitary and can sometimes feel removed from its real-world effects, it is hard to imagine more deeply rewarding praise.

After lunch, Halkin showed me around Zichron. We passed the house where Sarah Aaronsohn was

tortured by the Turks during the First World War. Aaronsohn, in her mid-20s, was a member of an anti-Ottoman spy ring that smuggled information to British intelligence. The Turks busted the ring, and most of its members were imprisoned or executed; Aaronsohn chose to end her own life. Halkin's book *A Strange Death* (2005) recounts his efforts to piece together the mysterious aftermath of these events in his adopted hometown. It is a complex and stirring work, postmodern in the best sense—a meditation on both the power



Zichron's main entrance, the Yishai Gate

and the frailty of memory, and on the ways stories live through communities and communities live through stories.

After we stopped a few times to see the sights of Zichron, Halkin led me up the pathway to his home of four decades—his home, that is, of only three days more. He walked me up to his study, in which sat a computer and many bookshelves. Light came in from a window overlooking his garden of prickly pears, lemons, persimmons, and pomegranates, and down and across the valley the minarets of Fureidis, a neighboring Arab town. The view is distracting, he told me, yet he still seems to have found beside it the focus to compose his many books and articles.

Halkin also showed me his copy of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, although he wasn't sure it was the same one he had swiped from the Columbia library; he may have disposed of the "hot goods" long ago, he told me.

When we came back down the stairs, we chatted with Marcia, Halkin's wife

of a half-century and mother of their two adult children. She is charming and shares Halkin's wit. Our conversation was a welcome break, it seemed, from the house-packing that occupied much of her day. And she took the opportunity to launch a mini-inquisition, asking me about my life.

On a birthday, Jews will often say *ad Meyah v'esrim*—"until 120," more or less an injunction to live the lifespan of Moses. Halkin's most recent book, published in 2016, is titled *After One-Hundred-and-Twenty: Reflecting on Death, Mourning, and the Afterlife in the Jewish Tradition*. When he fears death, he writes, "I fear losing a life that *has* been lived. I fear dying with the knowledge that I failed to accomplish or experience all I was capable of or meant to." He fears "the grief my death will cause others" and "dying without knowing exactly what it was that I lived for." Although the book touches on esoteric corners of history, theology, and art, it retains a plainspoken humanism:

There are days on which I want to live forever. There are days on which I'm glad I won't. And then the weather changes and again I want it never to end. And it's precisely then that I think, "It's good it's not in my hands."

The same humanism in reflecting on living and purpose can be found in Halkin's lone novel, *Melisande! What Are Dreams?* (2012). It is a poignant and often painful tale of love found and lost, of dreams and reality, of affection and madness, an account of Melisande (Mellie) and the two men who loved her, Hoo and Ricky. Hoo, the narrator, recalls that when he was in high school, he longed for a thousand lives—so that he could "watch a million suns set, love a million women, walk down a million city streets and lonely roads." But by the time, maybe a decade later, that Hoo and Mellie are about to marry, his longing for immortality has taken a new shape:

When we were in high school, I thought one life would not be enough for me. I wanted to do a million things, to love a million women.

I wanted to live a thousand lives. Now even a thousand seem too few. Not because I still want to love a million women, but because I want to love you a million times. If we had only one life to live together, I would live it with you joyfully, although I would wish for more. If we had ten lives, or a hundred lives, I would still wish for more. If you and I could be born over and over, I would wish it always to be as you and me, so that each time we could be together again. If after a thousand lives with you I was told I was living the last one, I would feel cheated.

Everyone, at some point, has thought himself invincible, and acknowledging inevitable death is supposed to be part of maturing. Hoo clings to the wish of a thousand lives, but with the purpose of living them with just one love. But he doesn't yet know, he can't yet know, what it fully means to live one life—the experience of the joy and sadness, the betrayal and guilt, the everyday mundane happiness, while aging through the years—let alone a thousand lives. In the pages that follow, he learns.

Halkin told me he feels much of his work has been misunderstood, not least *Melisande!* Knowing how disappointed he was with the novel's reception, a friend asked him to write a review of his own book. Instead of a review, he wrote the friend a letter explaining his feelings about the book. The letter—which he tells me “only two other people have read”—says, in part, “Even the people who have told me they loved *Melisande!* haven't given me the feeling of being aware of all that is in it. Not that they may not be; but they haven't conveyed it to me. And this is especially hard for me because *Melisande!* is the best thing I've ever written and what I would most like to be remembered by if I were never to write anything again.”

If novels are, as Halkin believes, “the highest form of literature,” why did he wait so long before writing one? “The stakes seemed too high,” he told me. “There's something godlike about being a novelist—you're free to create any world you want—but the responsibility, like God's when he created the world we live in, is enormous. For a long time, I didn't feel ready for it. Now, I hope I'll have the time and health to write one or two more.” ♦

BCA

# The Counterinsurgent

*The mixed legacy of Edward Lansdale.*

BY ANN MARLOWE



Colonel Edward Lansdale and Philippine defense minister Ramon Magsaysay in October 1952, on an inspection of the Philippine countryside

**Y**ou dirty son of a bitch. . . somebody's got to beat you up and I hereby appoint myself.” Thus

Edward Lansdale recalled addressing the CIA station chief in Saigon in the mid-1950s, when Lansdale was a CIA operative under cover of assistant air attaché at the American embassy. Whether or not his memory was exact—he recounted this anecdote in an interview three decades after the fact—the gist of the story is certainly correct: Lansdale was far from a natural fit in bureaucracies. He thrived only in informal settings, a trait that shaped his career and led to his contribution to American military history: as a pioneering practitioner of what are now known as counterinsurgency (COIN) techniques.

Born in 1908 to an automotive exec-

*Ann Marlowe is a visiting fellow at the Hudson Institute.*

**The Road Not Taken**  
*Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam*  
by Max Boot  
Liveright, 717 pp., \$35

utive and his homemaker wife, Edward G. Lansdale spent his childhood in Detroit, then in Westchester County, then Los Angeles. He was a mediocre student—although he did well enough in high school to get into UCLA in 1927, majoring in English. The campus had only opened eight years earlier, so the friendly, talkative Lansdale had a chance to help start new institutions, including a satirical magazine, a fraternity chapter, and an ROTC unit. His grades were so bad that he couldn't graduate after four years, so he quit school and moved to New York, hoping to make it as a writer or cartoonist.

It was not a great moment to find such work—the Depression was on—

COURTESY OF MUIR S. FAIRCHILD RESEARCH INFORMATION CENTER / MAXWELL AFB

but Lansdale did manage to find a wife, Helen Batcheller, a pretty and reserved woman seven years his senior. Giving up on New York, the couple moved to California in 1935, where Lansdale got a start in advertising when one of his brothers offered him a job. The nascent advertising industry proved a good fit for Lansdale's strategic intelligence, excellent writing skills, and personal brashness, but after Pearl Harbor, he burned to join the military. His efforts to enlist in the Army were rebuffed because of a minor medical condition, but a few months later he found a route to wartime service: in the Office of Strategic Services, a newly created intelligence agency. It was the perfect situation for a smart, charming, creative, untamed individual like Lansdale. Based in San Francisco and New York, he gathered intelligence and recruited agents, and was good enough at the work to earn promotions and to remain after the war's end at OSS and its successor entities: the Office of Policy Coordination, a highly secret, fast-growing group created in 1948 and tasked with acting on intelligence analysis, and the Central Intelligence Agency, which soon absorbed OPC. (From 1947 until 1963, Lansdale was officially in the Air Force, working on assignment at these intel agencies.)

Lansdale's historical importance is due to his successful-for-a-while counterinsurgency practices and to his accomplishments as a sherpa (or puppet master, depending on one's view) to Ramon Magsaysay of the Philippines and Ngo Dinh Diem of Vietnam. Both were doomed figures. The engaging Magsaysay was killed in a plane crash in March 1957 and a few years later Ferdinand Marcos began his two decades of kleptocratic rule in the Philippines. The more-problematic Diem was assassinated with tacit American approval in 1963, and of course South Vietnam fell to North Vietnamese forces in 1975. The question for historians is whether things might have turned out differently in either case.

Max Boot, the military historian, policy expert, and opinion journalist, is a prominent supporter of COIN strategies in Iraq and Afghanistan, so Lans-

dale is a natural subject for him. *The Road Not Taken*, Boot's thumping new biography of Lansdale, will appeal to anyone interested in the debates over the effectiveness of COIN.

For most readers, though, the question will be whether they should crack open a big new book—600 pages, plus notes—about a marginal figure when there already exists a well-written 1988 biography. *Edward Lansdale: The Unquiet American* by the late Cecil B. Currey, an Army reserve chaplain, weighs in at a comparatively slender 350 pages. Currey had the advantage of interviewing Lansdale in person in 1984—the quotation at the beginning of this review comes from one of Currey's interviews—as well as other individuals who are now long dead. (His book boasts an introduction by former CIA director William Colby.)

Both biographers mainly rely on the same sources—and Lansdale's was a well-documented life. (While working on a research project at the Hoover Institution, I myself read boxes of Lansdale's letters and dispatches from the Philippines.) Boot emphasizes that, unlike Currey, he has had access to Lansdale's letters both to his wife and to Pat Kelly, Lansdale's longtime Filipina mistress. Indeed, Boot is the only person besides Lansdale to have read both sets of letters.

This is a fair point, since Lansdale's long relationship with the smart, brave, and spirited Kelly was a huge and defining part of his personal life. Their affair began in 1946, and Lansdale tried to get his wife to agree to a divorce, but the proper, Christian Science-devoted Helen refused, and the marriage lasted until her death in 1972. Soon after Helen died, Lansdale and Kelly, who had often gone years without seeing each other, were married. By drawing on the lovers' correspondence, Boot's book gives us a much fuller picture of Lansdale the man. Yet it's still an open question whether Lansdale's letters to Kelly add much to our understanding of his professional life and his contributions to counterinsurgency theory and practice. I was struck by how much his letters home to his wife and family were written with an

eye to a larger readership, more like blog posts than personal letters. Even writing to Kelly, once past the obligatory mild sexual innuendos, Lansdale was relentlessly on message about the Philippine situation. Perhaps the biggest divergence between the public and private Lansdale papers is in his occasional candor in the latter about how bad the situation in South Vietnam really was.

Half adman, half spook; an accomplished writer who never finished college; an Air Force major general who never fought a battle—what is it that made Lansdale a “counterinsurgent par excellence,” as Boot calls him, whose “practices could be emulated by contemporary advisers in countries ranging from Mali to Mexico”? If we are to draw lessons for today's counterinsurgency efforts from Lansdale's record, it is worth looking closely at just how replicable his practices are.

Boot ably takes us through Lansdale's career in the Philippines. His first stint, from roughly 1945 to 1948, was spent composing reports based on his observations of the country and then working as a public affairs officer. During his second stint, from 1950 to 1954, he was personal adviser to Philippine defense secretary Ramon Magsaysay. Drawing on Lansdale's creativity and adman's insight into what moves people, as well as Magsaysay's credentials as a patriot and man of the people, the inseparable pair began to experiment with what we would now call “population-centric” counterinsurgency techniques to use against the Communist Huk rebellion then underway. They arranged food deliveries for farmers that the Huks exploited; they had soldiers hand out candy to children; they promised land to defecting guerrillas. They engaged in psychological warfare, manipulating superstitions and suspicions. These techniques, combined with more conventional military measures, destroyed the insurgency. Lansdale then strove in a thousand ways to have Magsaysay elected president in 1953, which he was. There followed a period of reasonably good government, sadly short lived.

Meanwhile, in 1953, while still working in the Philippines, Lansdale made his first trip to Vietnam. He moved there in June 1954, staying through 1956, with shorter postings ending in 1968. Lansdale brought with him a successful template from the defeat of the Huks. The only problem was each unhappy country is unhappy in its own way.

In Vietnam, Henry Kissinger wrote in 1965, Lansdale seemed to rely too much on Philippine precedents “no longer fully relevant”:

The Philippine Insurrection has as many points of difference from the Vietnamese civil war as similarities to it. In the Philippines the insurrection had never reached the scale of the war in Vietnam. There was no foreign base for the guerrillas. The indigenous government was much stronger. There was a tradition of working with Americans. The situation in Vietnam is much more complex, much less susceptible to bravura, individual efforts.

If Kissinger was right—and military historians have been arguing similar questions almost since the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam conflict began—then the subtitle of Boot’s book, *Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam*, is a misapprehension. Maybe there was no American tragedy in Vietnam. Not every error is a tragedy. Maybe Lansdale could have done nothing to stop the Communist takeover.

Boot’s observations certainly turn more critical as the book progresses, and by the time his narrative reaches the fall of Saigon, his belief in the Lansdale magic wanes:

Would the course of the conflict have been different if Lansdale’s advice had been heeded? There is, of course, no way to know. . . . South Vietnam might not have survived even if Lansdale had enjoyed more success in implementing his agenda; North Vietnam would have been a tough and determined adversary under any circumstances, with more will to win than the United States had.

And, Boot adds, Lansdale was “down-right delusional” to suggest that a proper American psychological-operations campaign against Hanoi could have led to the overthrow of the North Vietnamese politburo.

Boot gives short shrift to the

most successful U.S. counterinsurgency program, the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS), which is understandable given that it started in May 1967 and Lansdale left Vietnam for the last time in June 1968. But CORDS, which aimed at engaging the rural population through improved security and state institutions so that it would support the government of South Vietnam, is Exhibit A for those historians who maintain that the United States tried counterinsurgency tactics and still came up short.

Boot’s decision to largely leave aside the extensive scholarly debate about whether and how the United States could have won in Vietnam is an odd omission for a writer on military doctrine, especially one making the case that we should today be doing more to emulate the actions of his subject. Could a COIN-centric strategy have worked in Vietnam? There is a current in recent scholarship, exemplified by Dale Andrade’s influential 2008 article “Westmoreland Was Right,” that argues that a concerted COIN campaign would not have succeeded:

The strategy conducted by the North Vietnamese was arguably like no other in history. It was the epitome of insurgencies: a combination of large main force units, a well-entrenched guerrilla movement with deep roots in the South Vietnamese countryside, and the support of two powerful sponsors—China and the Soviet Union. All of this, combined with the ability to attack South Vietnam over and over again, with no threat of a serious retaliation, was an unprecedented advantage. To simply argue that the U.S. military ignored pacification does not begin to address the problem of countering such a threat.

As Andrade goes on to note, each of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam commanders was “caught on the horns of the same dilemma”: Gen. William Westmoreland “concentrated on the main forces and failed to prevent a guerrilla offensive in 1968,” and Gen. Creighton Abrams “placed great emphasis on pacification and failed to prevent a conventional buildup in 1972.” Neither commander, Andrade writes, “had the resources or the

opportunity to handle both threats simultaneously.”

Lansdale himself grew dubious about whether American efforts could succeed in Vietnam. Boot quotes a letter Lansdale sent his wife in October 1965:

I’m scared to tell everyone how really bad it is. . . . What has happened here is that after 20 years of war almost all the tensile strength has gone out of the social fabric. Military operations just make it limper. The village folks just don’t seem to give a damn about anything except to please be left alone.

This insightful remark, from one of the leading lights of COIN, acknowledges that COIN is limited by human and social nature—by the receptiveness of the population.

And of course counterinsurgency strategy is also limited in the other direction: by the abilities of the people attempting it. Nothing Boot says about Lansdale contradicts the criticism that COIN can only work so long as charismatic leaders practice it, and that it doesn’t work when mediocre leaders do. Here is Boot:

How different history might have been if Lansdale or a Lansdale-like figure had remained close enough to Diem to exercise a benign influence and offset the paranoid counsel of his brother.

Saying that Lansdale had a unique ability to get along with Diem and that had Diem stayed in power he could have saved Vietnam is not the same thing as saying that Lansdale’s or anyone’s practice of COIN would have saved Vietnam from Communist takeover. And if Lansdale was the only person who could manage Diem, I’d conclude not that Vietnam would have been better if President Kennedy had assigned Lansdale the job of resident Diem wrangler, which seems to be Boot’s position, but that Vietnam needed someone other than Diem.

A similar example of the dependence of counterinsurgency techniques on the all-too-rare alignment of practitioner and population can be found in the story of perhaps the most brilliant COIN theorist of them all, Lansdale’s French contemporary David Galula. He concludes his beautifully written

military memoir *Pacification in Algeria* by casually informing us that his two successors in company command were promptly shot dead by the “pacified” villagers of the Kabylie. (His immediate predecessor met the same end.) Not much of a success if you only make your area of operations safe for yourself.

Lansdale’s career was essentially over when he left Vietnam for the last time in June 1968 at the age of 60. As Boot makes clear, this was due to his personality: “In his attempts to influence American leaders, Lansdale lacked the deft touch he displayed in dealing with foreign leaders.”

Lansdale could be inspiring; men who worked for him tended to want to continue to work for him for decades. “I’ve met a handful of people in my life who have this particular genius for dealing with human beings in ways that make them feel dignified,” Walt Rostow said of him. Kissinger called Lansdale “a man of extraordinary gifts” and “an artist in dealing with Asians.”

Yet Lansdale stumbled again and again with the American ambassadors, cabinet ministers, CIA honchos, and—to a lesser extent—military commanders he had to work with in the Philippines, Vietnam, and Washington. Frustratingly, his good ideas were often overlooked because of his underlying resentment of having to operate in formal, structured, hierarchical organizations. Boot comments perceptively that Lansdale “viewed the bureaucracy as an enemy and, by so doing, turned it into one.”

My hunch is that Lansdale was not threatened by the two leaders who adored him, Magsaysay and Diem, because both had elements of the underdog about them—but he constantly found himself fighting with other Americans for alpha-male status. Rather than my hunch, I would prefer to have Boot’s thoughts on this matter, and in a book this length a few pages of psychologizing would have been perfectly in order, but none are to be found.

Throughout *The Road Not Taken*, Boot briefly mentions memorable cultural and political events contem-

poraneous with the stories he’s telling. But he shies away from exploring the broader cultural context for Lansdale’s ideas about counterinsurgency.

Boot does note that advertising—the field in which Lansdale worked through the late 1930s—was where he learned “many of the skills that he would later employ as a CIA operative.” Sure, persuading American housewives to buy a certain brand of soap powder is in some ways similar to persuading Southeast Asian villagers to support a certain political party; a catchy jingle might help in either case. But Boot’s book could have used some discussion of the emerging business of advertising and the theories that Lansdale would have been exposed to as a young adman and exactly how they might have shaped not only Lansdale’s but other American military men’s ideas in the 1950s.

Currey is only a little better than Boot on this, quoting Lansdale in 1950 when he was teaching psychological warfare at the Pentagon to Philippine Army officers training in the United States. “All you have to figure out,” Lansdale said, “is what you want the enemy to do and then use psychological means to get them to do it.” No 18th-century commander could have said such a thing, but neither biographer gives us the context to really understand the importance of psychology to changes in strategic thought.

As for military doctrine, the growing cultural relativism of the fifties and sixties surely has a great deal to do with the Kennedy administration’s openness to COIN. In 1957, soon after Lansdale finished his first stint in Vietnam, Marcel Duchamp wrote: “The creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work into contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.” The same tide that raised the boat of Duchamp raised that of counterinsurgency theory. COIN is also largely about perceptions; it’s the Vietnamese villager’s perception that counts.

Such ideas were in increasingly wide circulation during the Vietnam era. Edward L. Katzenbach, a deputy assis-

tant secretary of defense, wrote in 1962, “Although Mao never states it quite this way . . . his fundamental belief is that only those who will admit defeat can be defeated. . . . Or, conversely, when the populace admits defeat, the forces in the field might just as well surrender or withdraw.” Marine lieutenant general Victor Krulak, who ran one of the few successful small-unit counterinsurgency operations in Vietnam, echoed that sentiment: “The battlefield is in the minds of 16 or 17 million people.”

This perspectivalism is invaluable in small doses; it can aid critical thinking and can helpfully remind strategists of the importance of seeing events from others’ eyes. But if it dominates strategic thinking it can lead to disaster. In a brilliant, widely debated 2009 article, “A Strategy of Tactics,” whose title became a shorthand for the American problem in Afghanistan, military historian Gian Gentile argued:

In the American Army’s new way of war, tactics—that is, the carrying out of the “way”—have utterly eclipsed strategy. . . . Because the United States has “principitized” population-centric COIN into the only way of doing any kind of counterinsurgency, it dictates strategy.

Perhaps Boot decided his own views were sufficiently well known, with many articles and a book on counterinsurgency already under his belt, and so chose to leave them on the margins. But *The Road Not Taken*—an interesting book, written in prose that’s clear and well crafted—would have been much richer if Boot had engaged in this debate over the limitations of COIN.

It may sound odd to speak of so large a biography as halfhearted, but there it is: Boot seems charmed by but ultimately ambivalent about his subject. On Lansdale’s professional life, Boot is too narrowly focused on the task at hand, marshaling all the facts, to explore the intellectual and cultural context of his subject’s ideas. And for all the quoting from Lansdale’s letters, his personality still seems somehow elusive. But perhaps this is how Lansdale, both achingly sincere and a professional dissembler who always had an eye on posterity, would have wanted it. ♦

# Face and Fame

*Murillo's self-portraits and the vagaries of artistic reputation.* BY JAMES GARDNER

In the sundry debates about the Western canon that periodically vex our culture, attention is always focused on those who have been excluded from it, with the implicit assumption that some malign force is behind that omission. Far less discussed but no less important is the



Detail from Self-Portrait (ca. 1650-55)

question of who has fallen out—for the back end of the canon is every bit as changeful as the front. Who, for example, now reads Tasso or Lope de Vega or even Goethe? Yet a familiarity with their writings, acquired in the original language, was once part of the essential furniture of a cultivated mind.

In art as well, there was a time when Guido Reni and Claude Lorraine figured among the most famous painters in the world. People who had never

*James Gardner is completing The Louvre: A History, to be published by Grove Atlantic in 2019.*

**Murillo**  
*The Self-Portraits*  
The Frick Collection  
through February 4

heard of Caravaggio or Vermeer had heard of them and thrilled at the very mention of their names. But although they still have their admirers—and rightly so—it would seem superfluous to observe that neither of them can now claim the sort of transcendent authority that once was his.

And yet there may be no Old Master whose fortunes rose as high, or have fallen as steeply, as those of Bartolomé Esteban Murillo. In honor of the quadricentennial of his birth—he was baptized on New Year's Day, 1618—the Frick Collection has mounted an exhibition, *Murillo: The Self-Portraits*, that contains several portraits and self-portraits by the artist, as well as related drawings and engravings and two scenes of contemporary life. Let it be said of the Frick that, as a recent show on Louis Quinze ormolu can attest, the vicissitudes of popular taste are not at the forefront of their attention: It is always 1915 in the rarefied galleries of this incomparable Fifth Avenue institution.

The new exhibition sheds light on the improbable cultural flowering that occurred in the Andalusian city of Seville in the second and third quarters of the 17th century. In that time, Seville gave the world Murillo as well as Diego Velázquez, Francisco de Zurbarán, and Juan de Valdés Leal. The Frick exhibition is formed around one of the finest (and most recently acquired) works in its collection, the earlier of Murillo's two known self-portraits. It was painted between 1650 and 1655 and donated to the museum by

the widow of Dr. Henry Clay Frick II in 2014. Here the painter depicts himself as a dapper, mustachioed man in the prime of life. His white shirt is visible through the slit sleeves of a jacket as dark as his eyes, his flowing hair, and the shadowy background that threatens to engulf him. Only his face is sharply, almost shrilly, illuminated. It is framed by the round opening in a piece of shattered marble that works far better pictorially than logically.

For the first time in centuries, Murillo's other self-portrait, made some 20 years later, has rejoined its fellow painting in the present exhibition. It comes from the National Gallery in London, to which an expanded version of the show will travel next. In format



Detail from Self-Portrait (ca. 1670)

and tone, this later painting closely resembles the earlier one: It too depicts the painter dressed in black, looking out from a rounded stone frame. Rather it is the sitter who has changed. As his hand reaches tentatively, almost tremblingly, beyond the marble frame that contains him, he seems wearier and of course older than when we last encountered him, as though beaten down by experience. One might never guess that this was one of the richest and most celebrated painters of his age. As the chivalric pretensions of his younger self fall away, a chilly sobriety fills the void in this beautiful and moving work.

LEFT: FRICK COLLECTION; RIGHT: NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON

Commenting on the earlier version in 1843, Jacob Burckhardt wrote: “Compare it with the beautiful cavaleros from the court of Don Philip IV . . . by no means badly painted by Velázquez . . . and you will comprehend what it was that elevated Murillo above his own time.” Although many of our contemporaries would share Burckhardt’s admiration for this specific work, it is a fair guess that few of them would second his preference for Murillo over Velázquez, although that preference made perfect sense to many in the 19th century.

For us Velázquez is a paragon of incorruptibility. In the intensity of his gaze—whether he depicts fried eggs in a clay pot or the Duke of Olivares on his rearing steed—Velázquez sees all that rests on the surface of things and much that lies hidden, but nothing will divert him in his all-conquering quest for truth. By the same logic, however, much of Murillo seems fatally compromised, even though the quality that we find most distasteful in his art is precisely what seemed most admirable to many men and women of the 19th century. Consider *Christ the Good Shepherd*, a neatly composed image of Jesus as a boy of about 4, seated amid classical ruins with his left hand resting on an obliging lamb. In theory this is adorable, but for many of us today it is hard to stomach. Although this painting purports to be a humble rustic scene, the elegance of the boy’s coiffure and the scrubbed, luminous pinkness of his skin give the lie to such pretensions. It is indigestible in its saccharine equation of childhood and saintliness, in that cloying pietism that imparts an earnest glow to the child’s head and tries to pass it off as an inchoate halo. The very technique—the diffused and feathery focus of the image and the pat adequacy of the workmanship—goes far to explaining, and perhaps justifying, what so many of our contemporaries find objectionable in Murillo.

Obviously, there is more to Murillo than that. If one half of the 19th century public loved him for works like *Christ the Good Shepherd* (which is not in the present show), the other half, better informed by our lights, admired such proto-realist works as *Two Women at a*



Two Women at a Window (ca. 1655-60)

*Window* (which is). One of the few 19th-century dissenters at the altar of Murillo was John Ruskin. But his gripe was not with the saccharine piety of works like *Christ the Good Shepherd*. The target of his loathing was Murillo’s proto-realist work, those scenes of filthy street urchins and loose women that opened up to Courbet and Manet a new way of looking at the world. What he had in mind is represented at the Frick by *Two Women at a Window*, on loan from the National Gallery in Washington. No one seems quite certain of what is going on in this image. One of the women sits, while the other stands, beside an opened window in a bold composition whose predominant brown tonalities approach monochrome. The women gaze at us with a directness that is apt to seem either charming or impertinent. Are they merely being mischievous? Are they prostitutes? Whatever the

intention, the painting is stunning in conception and perfect in execution.

The truth about Murillo is that he works at a consistently high level of competence. Some of his paintings seem—to our generation, at least—to be vitiated by fakery, but others, like the self-portraits and *Two Women at a Window*, are exemplary. We must never forget that as regards cultural artifacts, the good does not take infection from the bad. If one artist makes 100 paintings and all of them are good, whereas another makes 1,000 of which 100 are good, then, *ceteris paribus*, mustn’t we esteem them equally? In fact, Murillo made far more excellent paintings, and of far greater variety, than can be suggested in the narrow scope of this review. But even if he had done nothing more than the works on view at the Frick, those by themselves would be quite sufficient to deserve our admiration. ♦

# The Anti-Bamboozler

*H.L. Mencken's campaign against bluff and bunk.*

BY DANNY HEITMAN

In a career that spanned the first half of the 20th century, Henry Louis Mencken became not only one of America's most memorable prose stylists, but also one of its most prolific ones.

Mencken (1880-1956) led many literary lives, often several at once. He began newspapering in his native Baltimore in 1899, quickly rising from a reporter to an editor and columnist. His bombastic commentaries for the *Baltimore Sun* gained attention far beyond his hometown, and his work for the *Smart Set* and the *American Mercury* affirmed his national profile as the dominant social critic of the 1920s. Mencken wrote about politics, music, drama, and literature, collecting his best essays in *Prejudices*, a series of six volumes that rests at the heart of his oeuvre. But there was so much more: memoirs, books on theology, ethics, the state of the American woman, and a mammoth philological study called *The American Language*. The thousands of letters he wrote to everyone from Theodore Dreiser to Ezra Pound to F. Scott Fitzgerald are their own monument to industry.

Mencken once estimated that he had published some 10 to 15 million words in various venues—a stream of production cut short by a 1948 stroke that deprived him of the ability to write. He lingered another eight years, though he casually suggested to British journalist Alistair Cooke that he traced the *real* time of his death to the year his typewriter fell silent.

But Mencken was much too prodigious

*Danny Heitman, a columnist for the Baton Rouge Advocate, is the author of A Summer of Birds: John James Audubon at Oakley House.*

## A Saturnalia of Bunk

*Selections from 'The Free Lance,' 1911-1915*

by H.L. Mencken  
edited by S. T. Joshi  
Ohio, 259 pp., \$49.95

talent to let a small inconvenience like mortality get in the way of his literary legacy. In the more than six decades since his passing, a steady

*Mencken's takedowns of particular politicians affirmed his general principle—namely, that the political culture he witnessed was an 'endless saturnalia of bunk, of bluff, of stupidity.'*

stream of Mencken material has continued to appear for the first time in book form, most of it drawn from his journalism.

No doubt the most ardent keeper of Mencken's flame is anthologist S. T. Joshi, who has assembled and edited numerous collections from the Sage of Baltimore's literary archive. They include *Mencken's America*, which collected some lively *Smart Set* essays on national culture, and *Mencken on Mencken*, an assortment of autobiographical writings that deserved a wide audience of readers. With *A Saturnalia of Bunk*, his latest project, Joshi brings together a selection of Mencken's col-

umns for the *Sun* during the years leading up to America's involvement in World War I.

"The Free Lance," Mencken's first real newspaper column, was an early indicator of his herculean productivity. It ran six days a week, with each column averaging about 1,200 words. Most political columnists today write commentaries of no more than 700 words and usually file twice a week.

Mencken was obviously a champion of quantity at his keyboard, but was the quality of his "Free Lance" output equally impressive? The question is worth asking, since Joshi's diligence in resurrecting the forgotten corners of Mencken's canon naturally makes one wonder if, at this point, he's reached the bottom of the literary barrel.

In his introduction, Joshi anticipates critics who might assume that the "Free Lance" columns are too provincial to inspire enduring interest—or too much of a freshman effort to reflect Mencken's mature genius. Joshi argues otherwise, though he feels compelled to offer a glossary detailing the regional figures of Mencken's day mentioned in these pieces. This list of names now largely lost to history recalls the charts that often appear in sweeping Russian novels, challenging the reader to navigate a network of characters as complex as the narrative itself.

But whether he was lambasting Coleman L. Blease, a now-forgotten South Carolina demagogue, or the ham-handed J. Harry Preston, then the mayor of Baltimore, Mencken's takedowns of particular politicians affirmed his general principle—namely, that the political culture he witnessed was an "endless saturnalia of bunk, of bluff, of stupidity, of insincerity, of false virtue, of nonsense, of pretense, of sophistry, of paralogy, of bamboozlement, of actorial posturing, of strident wind music, of empty words—even, at times, of downright fraud."

That passage from Mencken's "Free Lance" essay of December 30, 1911, the year he began the column, is an early example of a signature technique: his passion for the extended sequence of unflattering examples that sounds like a prosecutor merrily larding up charges

in an epic bill of indictment.

It anticipates a similar fusillade he'd publish a decade later in a legendary critique of Warren G. Harding's rhetorical style:

That is to say, he writes the worst English that I have ever encountered. It reminds me of a string of wet sponges; it reminds me of tattered washing on the line; it reminds me of stale bean-soup, of college yells, of dogs barking idiotically through endless nights. It is so bad that a sort of grandeur creeps into it.

The young Mencken's choice of "saturnalia" to describe the excesses of elective office is, one supposes, something turn-of-the-century readers of the *Sun* probably weren't used to. Exotic words flutter through *A Saturnalia of Bunk* like tropical birds, establishing another trademark feature of Mencken's work. Joshi stays busy footnoting references such as *Blattidae*, the Latin scientific name for a family of cockroaches; *chandala*, the lowest caste in Indian society; and *schmorrer*, a Yiddish term meaning beggar.

Mencken delighted in lively verbal obscurities, famously calling a retrospective of his work *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, a title that referred to "a collection of choice passages from an author or authors." He dismissed those unfamiliar with "chrestomathy" as "ignoramuses" and suggested that they "leave my vocabulary and me to my own customers, who have all been to school."

That was just like Mencken—recruiting his readers in common cause against the rabble. His abiding theme, in *A Saturnalia of Bunk* and all his other work, is that America is defined by a majority of morons, which makes democracy untenable. After democracy has run its course, he argues in one of these "Free Lance" columns, "there will have to be a thorough overhauling of the whole scheme, and the natural leadership of the alert and intelligent



H. L. Mencken, circa 1930

minority will have to be restored. . . . All human progress, not only in the practical arts, but also in government, religion and virtue, originates in this minority and is promoted by it."

How this republic of the enlightened elite would be established, Mencken doesn't say. He was many things—humorist, raconteur, amateur philosopher and philologist—but a policy wonk Mencken was not.

**I**f I had been an American," Alistair Cooke confessed a generation ago, "I would undoubtedly have worshiped H. L. Mencken in my college years and gone around the campus carrying the latest issue of *The American Mercury* as the Chinese, so we are told, carry *The Thoughts of Chairman Mao*." Cooke's comment underscores the special appeal of Mencken to those still touched by the adolescent joy of opposition, unbur-

dened by the obligation to offer a coherent alternative.

Mencken could be a delightful devil's advocate, as *Saturnalia* amply demonstrates. He offers an extended argument for women's suffrage here, eloquently advancing a position not widely taken at the time. Mencken later switched sides and opposed suffrage as it gained support, perhaps because he was constitutionally incapable of embracing anything a majority of his fellow Americans endorsed.

That tendency could be morally problematic, as in the closing essays of *Saturnalia* in which Mencken questions why Americans should be joining their allies in opposing Germany during World War I. As Joshi points out, "Mencken's assertions that Germany's rapid augmentation of its military might in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was purely defensive are both largely false and to some degree disingenuous."

"The fact is that logic is one of the youngest of the arts, and that relatively few men ever attain to any facility in its practice," Mencken wrote in "The Free Lance." Surely he knew that his own views were sometimes guided by passion rather than reason; he would, after all, name his most notable literary endeavor *Prejudices*.

His "Free Lance" column ended in 1915—possibly because the *Sun* no longer wanted to publish a pro-German commentator, possibly because he had better things to do, or maybe some combination of both.

If there was some loss for Mencken in all of this, he no doubt enjoyed it. As he told readers of "The Free Lance," he rather liked being the odd man out. "Personally, I have always found it a great deal more exciting to lose than to win," he wrote, "and what is more, a great deal more soothing to the soul." ♦

# From Party Hack to Reformer

*Chester A. Arthur's surprising career.*

BY KYLE SAMMIN

In 1878, Chester Alan Arthur held one of the most powerful and lucrative patronage positions in the federal government: collector of the Port of New York. Thanks to the percentage system by which he was paid, Arthur took in about \$50,000 per year at a time when the president earned half as much. The corruption and political influence of Arthur's office aroused indignation among good-government reformers, including President Rutherford B. Hayes, who fired Arthur and replaced him with someone devoted to the principles of merit selection for government offices. Arthur's career looked to have passed its apogee, and his faction of pro-spoils-system Republicans appeared to be in permanent decline.

Three years later, Arthur was president of the United States.

To the extent that Arthur exists in the public mind at all today, it is as one of the most famous owners of the 19th-century muttonchops-and-mustache combination. In *The Unexpected President*, the first major biography of Arthur since the 1970s, Scott S. Greenberger reintroduces Americans to their 21st chief executive in a solidly researched and fast-paced monograph that reminds us that there was more to Arthur than the sideburns.

A wealthy New York Republican with a reputation for corruption, Arthur never held elected office before his elevation to the vice presidency in 1880. Many mainstream Republicans decried the political maneuverings that placed Arthur on the ticket alongside presidential nominee James

**The Unexpected President**  
*The Life and Times of Chester A. Arthur*  
by Scott S. Greenberger  
Da Capo, 304 pp., \$28



*Chester A. Arthur*

A. Garfield, with Senator John Sherman of Ohio calling the nomination “a ridiculous burlesque.” When Arthur unexpectedly assumed the presidency after Garfield's assassination, there was widespread belief that he would usher in never-before-seen corruption and maladministration.

But it didn't happen. Although he rose to prominence as a proponent—and a beneficiary—of the spoils system, Arthur came to recognize the wisdom of hiring government workers based on skill, not party loyalty. The change was not immediate; Arthur grew in office, walking away from the cronyism that had advanced his career and championing some of the government reforms he once opposed. By the time he left office, he had done his part to dismantle the spoils system. There are worse ways

for an unexpected presidency to end.

Arthur was born in 1829, with the exact circumstances of his birth becoming a matter of controversy during the 1880 election. When he ran for vice president, Democratic operatives accused him of having actually been born in Ireland (his father's birthplace) and, when that was disproved, in Canada (where his older sister was born). In truth, as those proto-birthers eventually admitted, Arthur was born in the little town of Fairfield, Vermont, the son of an Irish Baptist preacher and his Vermont-born wife. He grew up in upstate New York, receiving a solid, if somewhat scattered, education.

Instead of following his father into religious life, Arthur went into the law and moved from the family home to Manhattan. The growing metropolis comes alive in Greenberger's telling; the reader gets a sense of how the rural pastor's son might have felt as he found himself in the midst of aristocrats and immigrants at the heart of American capitalism. Greenberger contrasts Arthur as an idealistic lawyer with the machine politician he would become, detailing the young man's work on the lawsuit that desegregated New York City streetcars.

In 1856, as abolitionists and slaveholders poured into Kansas, Arthur followed, hoping to shift the balance toward a free-soil state while possibly setting up a new legal practice in the freshly settled region. It is interesting to imagine what would have happened had he remained in “Bleeding Kansas,” where factional violence soon gave America a foretaste of the Civil War. But Arthur had a fiancée, Nell Hurdon, and when her father was lost in the wreck of the steamship *Central America* in 1857, Arthur returned east to comfort her. They married, and he needed to support her in the style to which they both had become accustomed.

The Republican party presented lucrative opportunities. Arthur's talent for management helped him rise in the party organization and also secured him a state-militia commission with the rank of general during the Civil War, although he was never required to serve in combat.

*Kyle Sammin is a lawyer and writer from Pennsylvania.*

After the war Arthur found his true calling within the political machine. In those days, customs employees were paid a small salary plus a percentage of the fines imposed on importers who attempted to evade the heavy protective tariffs then in place. Jobs at the New York Custom House were controlled by Arthur's friend and patron Senator Roscoe Conkling. A flamboyant and abrasive figure, Conkling realized the potential power to be gained by controlling customs jobs in the nation's busiest port and the money to be raised through "voluntary" contributions from the party men who were lucky enough to get jobs there. That patronage made the GOP powerful in New York, and Conkling was the gatekeeper of it all.

Eventually rising to the position of collector, Arthur was a man to be reckoned with in state politics. He was said to spend as much time on party business as on his nominal job. Greenberger accepts perhaps too unquestioningly the account of Silas Burt, a longtime friend of Arthur who clashed with him over civil-service reform, but Burt's impression is likely not far from the mark: He considered Arthur's public persona "bland and accommodating ... courteous and agreeable ... genial and 'cultured,'" but saw that in private Arthur was "the leader of a corps of partisan mercenaries." The Republican party had become, Burt believed, "a mere stalking horse for as corrupt a band of varlets as ever robbed a public treasury."

The cost of this excess was a backlash against patronage, and reform became one of the leading issues of the day. It divided the Republican party and the nation. In 1878, Hayes, elected as a reformer, fired Arthur and other top members of the Conkling machine and ordered their successors to hire based on merit and not to collect campaign contributions from the workforce.

Two years later, the GOP was divided

into pro- and anti-reformers. After a deadlocked convention that year, the party agreed to nominate Garfield, a moderate reformer; Arthur was nominated for vice president to balance the ticket between the two factions. Even though 3 of the previous 11 presidents had died in office, the vice presidency was still not considered an important job and was usually filled by party powerbrokers almost as an afterthought. When Garfield was shot to death in the

almost no new vessels since the Civil War. His administration planted the seeds that would grow into the triumphant fleet of the Spanish-American War. Arthur's term in office also saw flashes of his erstwhile focus on civil rights and equality, as when he criticized and vetoed a bill that would have shut down immigration from China for 20 years. But after the bill was revised to just a 10-year immigration ban, Arthur signed it. And he pragmatically accepted the defeat of Reconstruction: Although he would have been unlikely to prevail by any other course, in attempting to rebuild the Republican party in the South among dissatisfied white Democrats rather than the black Southerners who were once the party's natural constituency, Arthur played the part of an establishment politico.

Ultimately, even though Arthur's accomplishments in the name of reform alienated his old friends, they weren't sufficient to convince the Republican reformers that the former spoilsman was one of them. Weakened by the demands of office (and by the kidney disease that

was already killing him), Arthur made a halfhearted attempt at renomination, then retired to New York. He died in 1886, less than two years after leaving the White House.

Before he died, Arthur burned nearly all of his papers—an act of destruction that makes him a difficult president for biography. Greenberger acknowledges his debt to historian Thomas C. Reeves, whose research for his 1975 Arthur biography, *Gentleman Boss*, led him to some previously undiscovered papers, including many in the possession of Arthur's grandson and last living descendant. Arthur is sure to remain fairly unknown, but Greenberger, in revisiting the story of this idealist turned party hack turned reformer, helpfully reminds us of the ways corruption can shape politics and lives—and of how it can be resisted. ♦



An 1882 cartoon depicting Chester A. Arthur contemplating reelection—and how to handle Roscoe Conkling

first year of his term, this lack of consideration looked as though it would come back to haunt the party and the country.

But Arthur was determined to defy the popular impression of him. In part, this may have been due to the shift in public opinion after Garfield's assassin was discovered to have been a deranged office-seeker who thought Arthur's elevation would earn him a patronage job. Greenberger suggests that the shift may also have been brought on by Arthur's rediscovery of the idealism that first brought him into politics. Whatever the cause, the new president spurned his friends from the smoke-filled rooms and tried his best to govern as a reformer. His endorsement of the merit system helped ensure enactment of employment rules still in place today.

Arthur also began the modernization of the Navy, which had acquired

**"North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un just stated that the 'Nuclear Button is on his desk at all times.' Will someone from his depleted and food starved regime please inform him that I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works!"**

**PARODY**

**—Donald Trump, January 2, 2018**

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# White House confirms: Trump button 'massive'

**STRIKING  
RESEMBLANCE  
TO GAME SHOW  
BUZZER**

*Previous device suffered  
'projectile dysfunction'*

BY REED ROTHSCHILD

The Trump administration has confirmed that the president does, in fact, have a sizable button on his Oval Office desk. White House senior adviser for policy Stephen Miller called it "massive—and mesmerizing." Chief of staff John F. Kelly told reporters he has seen the button. "Certain people feel having a large desk button is comparable to having large feet," he explained. "It's indicative of the size of your, um, brain." According to Vice President Mike Pence, "It's real, and it's spectacular."

Last week President Trump bragged on Twitter that his nuclear button is "much bigger & more powerful" than the one allegedly at the disposal of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. "[A]nd my Button works!" added the president. The statement was widely



White House reporters react to Trump's display of his button Monday.

criticized. "The president should know better," said House minority leader Nancy Pelosi. "It's not how big the button is—it's how you use it. And we hope he never does."

During a briefing with reporters, White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said the button was replaced late last January. "The button used by President Trump's predecessor was in need of repair. There was a faulty coil causing a sort of projectile dysfunction," she said.

Utah senator Orrin Hatch described it as "the greatest button

that we've seen, not only in generations, but maybe ever." The outgoing Republican also called it "one heckuva button, and we're all benefiting from it."

But former Trump strategist Steve Bannon called the button "a joke." As he recently revealed to *New York* magazine, "It's all for show. The truth is, the button isn't even plugged in to anything. I stole it off the set of that game show 'Press Your

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JANUARY 15, 2018